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# **RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

## **ON RURAL RECONSTRUCTION**


**Sudhir Sen**

**VISVA-BHARATI**



**RABINDRANATH TAGORE ON  
RURAL RECONSTRUCTION**

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 **SUDHIR SEN, B.Sc. (ECON.), PH.D.**



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TO MY FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES  
AT SRINIKETAN





## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This little volume naturally falls into two parts. In Part I an attempt has been made to reproduce the central thoughts of Tagore on rural reconstruction. This is followed in Part II by a brief account of his practical efforts in this field.

For Tagore's thoughts reliance has been placed exclusively on his writings and utterances. Practically all references are to the original Bengali sources excepting "City and Village", which was written in English, and "Gora", for which the English translation has been used. The rich style of Tagore, as is well known, does not easily lend itself to rendering in a foreign language. Accordingly, translations have generally been free, though every care has been taken to represent the substance faithfully. Quotation marks have, however, not been used except in the few cases where the text has been closely followed.

A bibliography has been appended for those who might intend to pursue the subject further. Though not exhaustive, it is hoped that it includes all important writings and utterances of Tagore, having a direct bearing on rural reconstruction.

For the exposition and all comments offered in this book the writer alone is responsible.

SUDHIR SEN



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## INTRODUCTION

The versatility of Tagore's creative genius has been recognised on all hands. There is no branch of literature which he has not touched and enriched while music, dance and painting have all been given a fresh life and a new mould by this master artist. Tagore, however, did not dwell exclusively in the realm of ideas. No doubt the creation of beauty was his life's mission, but the beauty which he sought to create was not confined to the sphere of arts. Whatever added to the joy and beauty of everyday life, had a spontaneous appeal to him. He gave free reins to his imagination, yet never lost contact with the more immediate problems around him. And what is more, he not only wrote on those problems, but actually tried to solve some of them. The poet was a man of action as well. Indeed Wordsworth's lines on Milton might as well be addressed to Tagore :

“So didst thou travel on life's common way  
In cheerful godliness ; and yet thy heart  
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.”

There are at least three instances which bear witness to the practical aspect of Tagore's life. In the nineties it fell to his lot to manage the paternal estate on behalf of the Tagore family. For a good many years he discharged the “lowliest duties” of administration with a devotion and skill which endeared him to his tenants and won him recognition from the neighbouring Zemindars who were tempted to adopt many of the measures introduced by him. Again, in the



early days of what is now Santiniketan, he not only set the ideal before the school and inspired its staff and students to follow it, but also attended to a mass of administrative details including correspondence and accounts. Last but not least, his ventures in rural reconstruction bear the impress of a practical-minded man.

Few people, even in his own province, are fully aware of the value of his contribution in the field of rural uplift. Perhaps his dazzling achievements in literature and fine arts are largely responsible for this. For, as was but natural, they eclipsed his activities in other spheres. Yet without exaggeration Tagore was the father of the rural uplift movement in this country. He had become an ardent advocate of a thorough rehabilitation of rural life at least a generation before the Indian National Congress turned its attention in this direction.

Indian politics in those days was radically different from what it is now. It was primarily an arena for verbal combats. It moved in an orbit of its own, far away from the realities of life. Politics was then the concern of a handful of leisured persons drawn from learned professions. There was as yet no direct contact with masses. Political activities hardly ever went beyond making speeches and passing resolutions. The display of fine phrases was equalled only by the paucity of solid work. Right from the beginning Tagore deprecated agitation politics and sought to wean the political movement from its barren course. The poet was the first to advocate a constructive policy. In the days of the anti-partition movement in Bengal, he, more than anybody else, stirred patriotic feelings through his songs and speeches and writings. Yet he never ceased to stress the imperative need to harness the rising tide of emotion to some national enterprise for the benefit of the country. The train

would never make any progress, he urged, if the engine continued to whistle away all the steam.

In his programme of constructive work Tagore laid the greatest stress on the work of rural uplift. Here was, in his view, by far the most promising field for nation-building activities while this was also the field in which the need for patriotic enterprise was the most pressing. In his writings on political and social problems he came back again and again to this theme. This is particularly noticeable in the stream of essays which flowed from his pen in the opening years of the century, especially in the days of the anti-partition movement. His thoughts on village problems when put together, give us a complete picture of his ideal of rural life as also of the methods on which he would rely for its realisation. His rare insight into the problems of rural India, the comprehensive character of his recommendations, the transparent idealism which underlies them—all combine to lend a unique value to these writings. Thoughts alone did not, however, satisfy him. At least in two outstanding cases he made a deliberate attempt to give practical effect to the ideas he preached.



# THOUGHTS ON RURAL RECONSTRUCTION





## CHAPTER I

### EARLY INFLUENCES

#### I

Tagore's political and social philosophy was largely influenced by the ideas and forces with which he came into contact in early boyhood.<sup>1</sup> The Tagore family, it has been rightly said, served as a nursery for the spirit of Swadeshi in the nineteenth century. Though somewhat cosmopolitan in its mode of living which included a liberal measure of foreign customs, its members, as Tagore himself tells us, were all imbued with strong patriotic feelings. In a generation in which the educated sections of Bengal were becoming Westernised both in habits and ideas, a sturdy sense of self-respect and self-reliance radiating from here created a healthy counter-weight. Side by side with the rich cultural life which flourished in the family and the beginnings of a series of great achievements in the field of literature and fine arts, efforts were made, for the first time in the country, to stem the tide of foreign influence and to reconstruct social and economic life on an indigenous basis.

A *Hindu Mela* or Fair was founded in 1867. Its organisers laid stress on the revival of crafts, cultivation of literature and music, physical exercise, etc. The Fair used to meet on the last day of the Bengali calendar year. In its

1. For an account of the early influences referred to in this Section, see Tagore's *Reminiscences* (in Bengali, 1348 B.S. Edition) pp. 148-149; also *Rabindra-Jibani* or Tagore's Biography by Mr. Prabhat K. Mukherjee pp. 46-51.



first anniversary held in April 1868, the Secretary, explaining its aims and objects, said *inter alia* : It is a matter of disgrace that we are in the habit of turning to government officials for help in everything. To spread and strengthen the spirit of self-help is one of the fundamental aims of this institution.

The first national songs of India were composed in those days and were sung in the annual fair. Tagore, too, composed a poem on the occasion of its eighth anniversary when he had just entered his teens. Two years later he read another poem at the annual gathering. A famine was raging in India when Lord Lytton convened a Darbar at Delhi. In ancient India too Delhi was the venue for well-known sacrificial rites celebrated by kings with pomp and grandeur. How different were the conditions of India then, and what a picture of the country would the royal personages now find in that city! The contrast was the theme of his poem.

The influence of the Hindu Mela days on Tagore's thoughts can hardly be exaggerated. The ideas which inspired the organisers of this Mela give us a clue to the social philosophy which he developed in later life. Some of the essential features of the programme of rural reconstruction which he upheld before the country and sought to translate into practice, had their origin in what he had experienced at this Mela in his boyhood and early youth. The emphasis he came to lay on an awakening of the mind for liberating its creative forces, on the need to rely on self-exertion instead of depending on official leading-strings, on the organic unity of life whose problems are to be tackled as a whole and not in a haphazard piecemeal fashion and on the mingling of utility and beauty, of work and joy, no doubt grew with age and assumed varying literary forms, but in all these respects he was in line with those early pioneers of Swadeshi

whose enterprise had led to the foundation of the Hindu Mela.

Among those pioneers Jyotirindranath Tagore, the fifth brother of Rabindranath and his senior by thirteen years, occupied a very prominent place. His boundless idealism and intense love for the country found expression in diverse enterprises, of which the poet has left us a brief but vivid account in his *Reminiscences*. On the initiative of Jyotirindranath another society<sup>1</sup> was organised with the object of stimulating patriotic feelings and activities. Youthful phantasy coupled with an innate patriotic urge gave a touch of innocent mystery to its rites. Apart from his attempt to devise a so-called universal national dress, his enthusiasm to take to hunting and induce others to follow suit, he launched a number of Swadeshi enterprises such as weaving, match-making, running the first Indian-owned steamer along the Khulna-Barisal river route.<sup>2</sup> The resources at his disposal and the experience he could draw upon were not equal to his aspirations. But undaunted he marched from failure to failure. The first Swadeshi matches he manufactured outwardly looked all right. But as Tagore humourously says, burning patriotism could not increase their combustibility and it was hard to light them unless there was a flame hard by. Yet it would be unfair to draw a business balance-sheet of Jyotirindranath's Swadeshi ventures. The motives which impelled him transcended in importance all immediate results. Paradoxical as it may seem, this matchless enthusiast was not manufacturing matches, but something more potent and far-reaching. Through his adventures he was, as it were, creating and spreading a new

1. *Sanjibani Sabha*.

2. *Reminiscences* (Bengali edition, 1348 B.S.) pp. 152-56 and pp. 266-68.



spirit and a new outlook. This psychological by-product was enough compensation for his restless efforts. There was success even in his failure.

Young Tagore spent some of the most impressionable years of his life with this brother. He himself has told us how much he owed to this influence for his later development. Undoubtedly he carried into maturity something of Jyotirindranath's patriotic urge, his zeal for enterprise, his rare ability to put the whole heart into the humblest undertaking and, above all, his bold spirit which was neither baffled nor ruffled by failures.

Already in the early eighties in some of Tagore's writings and utterances we can catch a glimpse of the thesis which he was to propound in mature years. ("We may get many things from the British by begging, but never self reliance ; what is obtained by begging can never last ; what is achieved by our own efforts, has permanence.") This observation made in an article on "Nationalism" published in 1883 when he was two-and-twenty, was an anticipation of the gospel of self-help which he was to put forward with characteristic force in "Swadeshi Samaj" and which he reiterated in some form or other up to the end of his life. In another paper entitled "In Actual Practice"<sup>1</sup> and read in a public meeting in 1884, he made the following remark: ("It is the small work which is the most difficult of all ; an imposing programme is often but an evasion of real work.") "Our sphere of activities," he continued, "lies near us and around us, in our homes and in our neighbourhood." Here is a clear indication of the ideal on which his work of rural reconstruction was to be based.

1. *Hate Kalame*. For extracts from this paper, *vide* Tagore Memorial Number of the Calcutta Municipal Gazette.

In the early nineties a new phase began in Tagore's life. Born and brought up in an urban milieu he now came into direct contact with villages. As already mentioned, the task of managing the ancestral property devolved on him. For many years he had to undertake frequent visits to such villages as Silaidaha and Patisar.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes he stayed there for months at a stretch. His writings, as every Bengali reader knows, have been greatly influenced by his experience in rural surroundings. A born lover of natural beauty, he now had before his eyes the scenery of rural Bengal unfolded in all its splendour. (He observed with intense interest the changes which seasons brought in their train.) The vast plains now waving with corn, but again stretching for miles without a patch of green, the rivers fed with a turbulent mass of water and bursting over the banks but shrinking within a few months into a thin, emaciated line with hardly any sign of life in them, the play of clouds in the sky, the trees, the flowers, the birds of Bengal—all these have been immortalised in many of his poems and other writings.

If the wealth of Nature thus enriched his poetic life, the gain from experience in human affairs was no less real to him as a man. He now came into contact with men on a scale as never before in his life. The sombre realities of rural life imparted a new tenderness to his outlook. Henceforward human touches became broader and deeper in his literary creations. His sensitive mind reacted spontaneously to the sufferings which he saw around him. New chords were touched in his heart, which brought forth new notes sweetened with more human feelings. The wings of Imagina-

1. Silaidaha and Patisar lie in Nadia and Rajsahi Districts respectively.



tion ceased to flutter as restlessly as in early youth. The "scorner of the ground" became more and more "true to the kindred point of heaven and home". Everything now took "a sober colouring from an eye" that had kept long watch over the miseries of life. His writings became laden with the "soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering".

Many years later referring to these early experiences of village life, Tagore told us<sup>1</sup>: The people "used to come to me with their joys and sorrows, their claims and complaints. All this enabled me to form a true picture of villages. The outward appearance with rivers and wide plains, rice fields and huts nestling in the shelter of trees became familiar to me as also the inner story of rural life. The sufferings of the people became more and more intertwined with my daily work."

The more he saw of the poverty and suffering of the village people, the more restless he became to do something for them. "It seemed to me a shameful thing that I should spend my days as a Zemindar, concerned only with money-making and engrossed in my own profit and loss account." This first-hand experience of village life left a deep mark on his mind. Since then he harboured a strong feeling as if he was under some personal obligation to the villages. The inner craving to do something for them never weakened and continued to prey upon his mind up to the last days.

1. In a talk given to the workers at Sriniketan in summer 1939. See later Chapter VIII.

## CHAPTER II

### SWADESHI SAMAJ

#### I

In a well-known essay called *Swadeshi Samaj* (the "Indigenous" or Indian Society) published in 1904,<sup>1</sup> Tagore set up a powerful plea to reorganise rural life. In this paper which was the first comprehensive statement of his social philosophy, he analysed the causes of the disintegration of village life and made concrete suggestions for its reconstruction. Scarcity of drinking-water had caused great hardship in certain parts of Bengal and the public had looked up to the Government for help. The disappointing official response impelled him to examine why, unlike in the past, people had come to depend exclusively on the State for such welfare work as the supply of water. The consideration of the immediate issue took him far afield so that the essay abounds in reflections on the contemporary political movement, the characteristic features of the Indian civilisation, its search throughout centuries for a synthesis to meet the specific needs of a specific age, the subsequent stagnation and its causes, the repercussion of the impact of modern forces from the West, and so on. His thoughts on village problems were intertwined with these broader reflections. It would, however, be worth our while to disentangle them as far as possible, for Tagore himself attached a good deal of importance to

1. Included in the collection of essays called *Samuha*, (reprinted in 1335 B.S.).



this essay, the main contents of which he affirmed up to the last.

In Europe the State is entrusted with the task of looking after social welfare. In India it was only partly the case ; the major burden fell on the Society. No doubt it was a duty of the Indian king to encourage, maintain and reward teachers who dispensed free education. But primarily it was a function of every household. Consequently, the absence of royal assistance could not dislocate our system of education. Similarly, the king excavated tanks, but just as numerous other well-to-do persons used to do. Our sources of water supply did not dry up even if the king happened to turn out indifferent.

Thus what is State to England was Society to us. When the great warrior Karna gave up his ear-rings, his end became inevitable ; when veteran Arjuna could no longer lift his famous Gandiba bow, he was beaten by an ordinary robber. Thus the life-giving force is not concentrated in the same part in all countries. Some derive their strength from armaments ; others wear their protective armour all over the body. Our strength is not to be found in the same part of the body politic as Europe's. It would therefore be useless if our measures for self-protection were to be confined to the same sphere as those of the latter. The source of Europe's strength lies in the State or the Government ; our well-being depends on the Society.<sup>1</sup>

England lives as long as her State continues to live as a vital organism. We live as long as our social organisation remains unimpaired. Kingdom after kingdom arose in India and vanished away without leaving a trace behind, yet we

1. An appendix to the Essay on *Swadeshi Samaj*, (*Samuha* p. 29).

continued to live as a nation because our Society never failed us.

Things, however, have changed. Our mind is no longer within the Society. It is persistently looking in other directions. The system of social duties, which was carefully built up through ages, is now breaking down. We are one by one transferring to the State those functions which distinctly fell within the purview of the Society. As a result our vitals which were carefully protected through long centuries, have now been opened up and exposed to outside attack. Herein lies our main problem. Scarcity of water is but a symptom.

Wealth in India was regarded as a social trust. The wealthy had an unwritten obligation to share their wealth with others. It was their task to look after social work, to maintain village schools, to excavate tanks, to help the poor and the needy, and, during religious festivities as well as on such occasions as the marriage of their sons and daughters, to provide entertainments and amusements to the people of the village. They were the pillars of rural society. The burden imposed on them was gladly and willingly borne. For, brought up in the old tradition, they were imbued with a genuine social spirit and considered it wrong not to fulfil their duties. Besides, they were attached to their native village and took pride in its general well-being. The appreciation of the village people served as an additional incentive. They valued it highly and regarded it as the best reward for their services. As a result there prevailed an atmosphere of competitive generosity, in which public utilities were well looked after. The welfare of the village, it appeared, was in safe hands.

Old values have, however, changed. Appreciation of village people is no longer enough for the well-to-do classes.



The premium once set on it has disappeared in most cases. The rich are now far keener on official recognition. A title conferred by the Government is valued higher than the gratitude of the people in the village home. And such titles are bestowed on grounds which are not even remotely connected with services rendered in the village.

Secondly, the pursuit of wealth calls or tempts the upper classes away from the village. Distance weakens the old bonds with the rural home. In course of time they transfer their allegiance to other places, usually urban centres. They yield to the manifold temptations which make increasing calls on their resources. Life becomes more and more self-centred. Wealth ceases to be a social trust and becomes a private property. The unwritten social obligations are written off for good. Villages are often double losers. They are deprived of the services of the well-to-do classes. They are also drained of their wealth which is consumed in urban centres. Thus those who once used to feed village culture have now come to be fed by villages in their new habitat.

If a river which flowed by the side of a village for a long time, sharply turns away from it, the village suffers in many ways. Its water becomes scarce, its harvest poorer, its health impaired, its trade choked. Our heart which so long flowed through the village and kept it free from disease and enriched and cheered it in various ways, has now suddenly changed its course. As a result its temples are now in ruins, there are none to repair them ; its tanks are contaminated, there are none to lift the mud ; the buildings of the rich are deserted, they no longer resound with festive joy.<sup>1</sup>

1. *Samuha*, p. 2. "Not only have the waters of the village run dry, but also its heart." See Tagore's "City and Village", *Viswabhabati Bulletin* No. 10, p. 5.

Many have lamented in the past that India is constantly drained of her wealth in many ways and on many excuses. Surely it is no less deplorable if the wealth of the heart flows out of the country and every bond of welfare with the people comes under an alien control.<sup>1</sup>

The widening gulf between towns and villages,<sup>2</sup> Tagore pointed out, produced some curious anomalies. These were best reflected in our politics which had been pursuing a barren course. There was no end of preparation to impress the authorities, but the real needs of the country went by default. For us there could be but one rational aim in the political field, namely, to unify the heart of the people. Instead we had given up our language and our customs and traditions in order to capture an alien heart.

If the Provincial Conference had been bent on the welfare of the people, it would have acted differently. Instead of calling an assembly after the British pattern, it would have organised a big fair. There would have been provision for an open-air country theatre and other entertainments and amusements which would have attracted people from far-off places. We should have organised an exhibition of indigenous products, industrial and agricultural. We should have rewarded our best theatre party, the best singers, and so on. We should have instructed the public with magic lanterns on questions of public health. In this way high and low all would have come together to discuss various problems of our life, employing the simple Bengali language for the purpose.

Country fairs, Tagore always urged, are an invaluable means of public education. Here is an old institution, the roots of which go deep into our past. It provides us a

1. *Ibid.*, *Samuha*, p. 16.

2. See Chapter VII.



rare opportunity to bring together the country people and get close to their heart. Being in a holiday mood, the people on such occasions are more receptive of new ideas. A fair is, as it were, an invitation of the outside world into the village. The village bounds widen for the time being, its narrowness disappears and its heart opens wide both to receive and to give.

✓ A large number of fairs take place all over the province at different times of the year. Our first duty is to prepare a complete list of them with full details. We should next organise these fairs, infuse a new life into them, give them a new direction. If the intelligentsia were to attempt to establish a friendly relationship between Hindus and Mohammedans, and keeping aloof from futile politics, discuss the needs of the district and issue practical instructions with regard to schools, country roads and village paths, water supply, common pastures, etc., a great service would then be rendered to the country which, within a short time, would once again begin to pulsate with new life.

Nor need there be any financial difficulties. We could, Tagore goes on, set up something like a Fair Society to organise fairs by turn all over the province. This peripatetic body would include in its programme such items as open-air theatre, religious music, cinema shows, magic lantern lectures, gymnastics, display of fireworks. It could arrange to pay a lump sum as rent to the Zemindar in exchange for the right to levy a tax on the stall-keepers and other salesmen fixed as a certain percentage of their net profit. If run along proper lines, a fair could not only be made to pay its own way, but would leave a substantial margin of profit which could be utilised in many ways for the benefit of the country. The Fair Society would in this way come to know the country inside out. It would establish an intimate



contact with the people in various places. There is, in fact, no end of the services which it would be in a position to render.

It was our custom, he says, to initiate the general public into literature and religion on festive occasions through the medium of healthy entertainments. But Zemindars and other well-to-do people are now attracted to towns so that there is no longer any provision for such enjoyment. The Fair Society could turn the tide once again and bring joy and culture back to the village.

The tanks which used to give us water and health, are now contaminated. They not only supply no drinking-water, but are liberally dispensing disease and death. Our fairs, too, have degenerated and have become a hotbed of evils. The neglected fields not only grow no corn, but are bristling with thorny weeds. We owe it as much to our country as to our religion to rid these fairs of ugly amusements and turn them, as of yore, into a fit vehicle of public education.<sup>1</sup>

It has all along been the tradition in India to cultivate human relationship on an extensive scale. The principle of joint family was extended, as it were, to include also the outsider. Neighbours were treated as friends. Terms denoting blood relationship were freely applied to others as a mark of endearment. This extensive cordiality may have its disadvantages. But, he insists, it is in our nature, it is oriental and it sweetens human relationship to an extent which more than compensates all its disadvantages.

In an essay written a year after "Swadeshi Samaj" and significantly called "Luxury's Noose",<sup>2</sup> Tagore deplored the general tendency to luxury: The nation-wide habit of

1. *Samuha*, pp. 10-11.

2. Included in the collection of essays called *Samaj*.



living beyond means is involving us in ruin and destroying our cherished values. The habit has spread also in villages and is eating into the vitals of rural life. Our requirements are rapidly outrunning our resources. A cultivator's son would leave the paternal profession because he finds that the income is no longer enough to meet his increased needs, but in most cases only to be landed in an office where as a petty clerk he would perhaps struggle in vain all his life to make both ends meet. Our tradition of extensive cordiality could be maintained only when our habits were inexpensive. Luxury now snaps the bond which binds us with our friends and neighbours.

The traditional ties between man and man in our land are now slackening. We are more and more falling away from one another, and are erecting around us cold barriers of individualism after the Western fashion, though it runs counter to our nature. "Shall we not reconstruct the dilapidated house of our Mother?" There was a time when our country cared little for wealth. Indeed in a characteristic way she lent a peculiar dignity and beauty to poverty. Shall we now prostrate ourselves before wealth and insult our religion? "To eat alone was a greater shame for us than to use humble banana leaves for sharing our food with others. Shall we not get back that sense of shame?"<sup>1</sup>

## 2

As a sequel to the essay on "Swadeshi Samaj" Tagore prepared a complete scheme to give practical effect to the ideas he had expressed in it. The whole scheme centred round the reorganisation of village life through concerted

<sup>1</sup> *Samuha*, p. 28.

efforts. Its salient features were the revival of cottage industries to mitigate the poverty of the masses, intimate co-operation between rural workers and villagers as also among the villagers themselves, curtailment of expenditure at socio-religious ceremonies, the creation of a corps of volunteers who would strive to establish harmonious relationship between Hindus and Mohammedans and the appointment of a people's representative as the Leader of the Society, who would be chosen by the people and would enjoy implicit obedience from them during his tenure of office.



## CHAPTER III

# DURING THE SWADESHI MOVEMENT IN BENGAL

### I

In a paper publicly read in 1905, just before the partition of Bengal went into force,<sup>1</sup> Tagore analysed the conditions then prevailing in the country, set forth what he felt to be the most pressing needs of the hour and, as in "Swadeshi Samaj", exhorted his countrymen to rely on self-exertion and get to solid constructive work without the least delay. This essay gives us a valuable cross-section of his political and social ideas so that we should do well to note the salient points.

After long suffering we have at last learnt one lesson, namely, that we must unite, not to send an application or make an appeal to others, but to do our own work. If the moist wood, after smouldering so long, has now luckily caught a flame, surely it must be put to some rational use before it is all burnt out. There might be great fun in poking into the hearth needlessly, but that would only hasten the moment when there would be nothing left in it but ashes.

1. *Abastha-O-Byabastha* or the Situation and the Solution, first read at the Town Hall in August 1905 and repeated at the Albert Theatre within a week. First published in *Bangadarshan*, 1905, later included in the collection of essays called *Atmasakti* or Self-help, now available also in *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, Vol. III, pp. 600-620.



The first point to be remembered is that in the past we expected from others services to the country which we ourselves were not prepared to render. No wonder that we have been disillusioned. That disillusionment would do us good.

The partition of Bengal, which is now imminent, has inflicted a wound in our heart. Yet in our grief there is joy. For we have at last begun to feel for ourselves and have ceased to look to others for help. The auspicious hour should not be spent just for the fleeting satisfaction of an unrestrained indulgence in emotion. We must bridle the surge of emotion so that, in a sober form, it may become an abiding feature of our life and steadily spur us on to creative work.

Such work, he insists, is the only real medium of unity. We can best unite only when we collectively undertake to accomplish something. There is no other effective means of bringing about a lasting union.

Tagore went on to enlarge upon his idea of constructive work. At bottom it was a plea for starting a parallel government, which he had already put forward in "Swadeshi Samaj". The outline was the same, though there were differences in detail. He suggested the formation of an executive body to be placed under two leaders, one a Hindu and the other a Mohammedan. We should bow before them, subordinate ourselves to them, pay them taxes, carry out their injunctions, abide by their decisions, in short, respect them and thereby respect ourselves and the country.

He then read a report about the activities of Armenians in Russia who had evidently achieved conspicuous success in replacing official courts by a private system of justice. This should serve as an object-lesson to us. We should no longer run after Government jobs which degraded us as a nation. We must devise a system under which our physicians,



teachers, engineers and other experts might serve under our own countrymen and thereby find full scope to utilise their abilities. Otherwise we could never realise the full measure of the powers that now lie buried in us. Besides, we should remember that love is born out of service. If we, the educated class, could put our heart and soul into some enterprise, if we could feel at every step that we are serving the cause of the country, it would then become superfluous to learn from books that we should love our motherland. There would then be an end of the pitiful inconsistency, namely, that while we boastfully proclaim our ability and loudly claim an equality of status, we never in fact cease to depend on the charity of others to meet every single want of our national life.

Can we not improve our agriculture with the help of our agricultural experts? asks Tagore. Is it impossible to look after public health and sanitation with the help of our own medical men? Can we not ourselves undertake the task of education in our villages? Is it really beyond our capacity to settle all quarrels through some simple method of arbitration rather than run to the law-court every time in order to be ruined morally and materially? All this would be possible if we could create a central organisation to guide national enterprise. Unless we start some such organisation, all our excitement would be no better than mere intoxication, at the end of which we would find ourselves back in a slough of despondency.

It is high time to realise, he continues, that rights bestowed by others can never enrich a nation. Indeed it is bound to have the contrary effect. For example, the panchayat system which was once a fully national institution, is now being recast in an official mould. The new panchayat would depend for its power not on the will of the people,



but on the fiat of the Government. And just because of that it would become a prolific source of trouble. It would create mutual jealousy, unworthy persons would employ dubious means to be elevated to this position, and to get credit from the Magistrate, they would, openly or secretly, betray the trust of the villagers. Thus as an officialised institution it would achieve just the opposite of what it used to do while functioning as an indigenous system. What was once a source of strength to the villages would henceforward become a source of their weakness. The inescapable truth is that there is a fundamental difference between power conferred by our own countrymen and that conferred by others. In one case we continue to owe allegiance to our own people, while in the other we end by surrendering ourselves heart and soul to outsiders.

To take another example, moneylenders are ruining our peasantry by advancing money to them at prohibitive rates of interests. Again we appear unable to think of any other remedy than appealing to the authorities. Yet if we were to invite the Government or foreign moneylenders to establish agricultural banks and lend to the cultivators at a lower rate of interest, we would still leave them dependent on the mercy of others. Should we in this way mortgage the future of those who are the real strength of the country and the source of its wealth? Is it so very difficult to realise that we would impair our own strength and forge new chains for the country in the same proportion in which we continue to get our own work done by others? Power conferred from outside, however convenient it may look at times, is in reality a curse in disguise.

Without further hesitation we must therefore take the Government of the country in our own hands. We must revive our own panchayat before the grip of an official



system begins to stifle our village life. We ourselves should protect the peasants, educate their children, improve our agriculture, look after village health and sanitation and save both the Zemindar and his tenants from ruinous law suits. Let us not even think of accepting help from authorities, for to accept such help could only mean an invitation to the powerful to intrude upon the rights of the weak.

If there is anything in the province, in the creation of which we could take a legitimate pride, then surely it is Bengali literature, which never depended on official spoon-feeding for its growth. It has sprung spontaneously from our own minds. That is why we can derive so much strength from it. The number of books in Bengali may as yet be limited, in variety it may not stand comparison with the rich literatures in many other languages. Yet in spite of all its deficiencies, it looms so large in our eyes because it is our own creation and has flowed straight from our heart. It may be poor, but it is full of future promise. For it does not depend on outside favour for its sustenance ; it is instinct with our own life.

It may not be possible, he goes on to say, to elect at once a group of leaders for the whole country. Those of us who are alive to the urgency of the problem can, however, immediately join hands in organising small bodies, elect regional leaders and get to work without further delay. Together with our neighbours each of us could set up an independent administration to safeguard our joy and happiness, health and education. Each of the regional bodies could establish its own primary schools, its library, gymnasium, co-operative stores, dispensary, savings bank, board of arbitration and an assembly hall for healthy entertainments. If active organisations now spring up in different parts of the country along such lines, they could



later be united to form something like an All-Bengal Representative Assembly.

The Bengal Literary Society should join us in the sacred enterprise of achieving national unity. Without depending on anybody the Society has been unobtrusively doing its utmost to gather close information about the country and has thus added very largely to our store of knowledge. It has taken upon itself the great task of spreading in the whole country a consciousness of our unity in thought and outlook, in language and literature. The time has come when it should make an earnest attempt to obtain the active participation of the people in this work. It should therefore establish branches in districts and by turn hold its annual meetings in different centres.

If we now turn our whole mind on ourselves, grounds for despair would disappear once for all. No extraneous forces would then be able to divide us. Let us not ask for any favour. Let us instead concentrate our attention on ourselves, and we shall soon discover that what God has given us is enough for us and constitutes the only tangible asset that we possess. No precious store may lie hidden for us underground, but there is magic in the soil itself ; if we cultivate it with proper care, we should never have any cause for disappointment.<sup>1</sup>

## 2

Soon the Swadeshi movement began to run a less desirable course. There was an outburst of patriotic feelings, but it contained a good deal of froth and foam. The desire for constructive work was not commensurate with the general excitement and patriotism tended to be confused with mere

1. Concluding lines of *Abastha-O-Byabastha*.



sentimentalism. Besides, political extremism was visibly on the increase, much to the dislike of Tagore. In 1907, two years after his address on the "Needs of the Hour", he published an article on the "Disease and its Cure"<sup>1</sup> in which he unsparingly criticised this tendency and, at the risk of incurring the displeasure of his countrymen, drew pointed attention to some harsh truths. Political subjection, he boldly asserted, was the result of our past sins and could not be ended by an unrestrained display of emotion. Subjection, he insisted, was but a symptom ; the real disease went far deeper and had its roots in our own character and mentality. There was thus no magic remedy for it, no short-cut to freedom. To achieve freedom the first task was to create those conditions in which alone it could exist. This called for years of patient, hard work. Apostrophizing the youth of the country, he said :

For those young men who are now in an excited mood, I can have but one advice—quietly absorb all excitement within yourselves and be composed, do not utter a single word, do not weaken your own character by constant exaggerations in your speech. And if you can do nothing else, at least leave off all newspapers, go and settle in the midst of a village, and give knowledge and joy and hope to him whom nobody has ever cared to talk to, serve him, let him know that he too is, after all, a man and therefore has his dignity, that he is not born in this world simply to be despised. Ignorance now makes him shudder before his very shadow ; free him from this bondage of fear and instil courage into his heart. Protect him from injustice, from starvation and from blind superstition.

1. *Byadhi-O-Pratihar*, published in *Prabashi*, *Sravana* 1314 B.S. (i.e. in 1907), now also included in *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, Vol. X, pp. 623-35.



## 3

Early in 1908, in his presidential address<sup>2</sup> at the Provincial Conference held at Pabna, Tagore reiterated these ideas with great force. Once again he sought to save the political movement from its fatal course and to turn it into an effective vehicle of nation-building activities. In a masterly analysis of the causes which had led to the growth of extremism he showed that it was, in the main, an offspring of official extremism, a kind of reflex action on our part. Nevertheless, he urged upon the countrymen to shun that path because it could never lead to the goal. The "steam" should not be allowed to run to waste while great tasks lay ahead.

As regards the immediate programme of work, he once again stressed the need to develop gradually a broadbased organisation covering the entire country. The Provincial Conference ought to have branches in every district with ramifications in rural areas. Villages should again be in a position to meet their varied needs. He suggested the creation of village unions (*mandali*), each with an executive body of its own to guide all activities in villages and provide for the essentials of village life. In this way the spirit of self-government would spread all over the country. Villagers should be trained, encouraged and assisted to establish primary schools, schools for crafts, paddy stores, co-operative stores and banks. In addition each union should have its assembly hall where people could gather both for work and enjoyment and where responsible members of the executive could settle all quarrels through arbitration.

Tagore laid great weight on the need for collective enterprise in villages. Our peasants would never be able to

2. Included in *Samuha*.



earn enough as long as they continued to till their narrow strips of land separately. The use of labour-saving machinery was indispensable, but it would be possible only if collective cultivation were introduced through the initiative of the union executive. If canes were crushed by a machine on a co-operative basis, it would be worth the while of the union to procure one. If jute fields were pooled and cultivated together, the raw jute, after the harvest, could be pressed in one pressing machine collectively owned. Milkmen could join hands for breeding cows and producing butter and ghee, and thus lower their costs of production. A co-operative society of weavers would be in a position to introduce modern textile machinery and with individual weavers supplying their labour, production could be very much increased so that all would ultimately be far better off.

Just as the modern factory has largely driven out the handloom, so also the British rule, because of its all-pervading and all-comprising character, has upset the village society. When in course of time small institutions grow into bigger ones in response to the expanded needs of the time, there is in most cases a resultant advantage. But such development must be natural and organic. Our village organisation, small as it was in size, was ours ; the British system may look bigger, but it is not our own. In consequence, it has not only bred inertia in us, but is actually unable to meet our needs.

That is why all enterprise has now faded away from village life. Tanks and other sources of water supply are now silted up, common pastures are not properly looked after, temples are not repaired. The unlettered sons of those pundits who once used to create spiritual ties among the village people, now give false evidence in law-courts ; the wealthy families whose social functions were the chief source



of education and entertainment in villages, have now been attracted to towns ; those who once protected the weak and punished the wicked, have now been replaced by the police inspector with results which are known to all. There is no longer any high ideal in villages nor any living example of social service. No force of healthy tradition can now work from within. All that we now find are the artificial trammels of law. Through constant litigation the village is now tearing itself to pieces like a mad man plunging his nails into his own body. Jungles are spreading, malaria is becoming increasingly severe, famines recur more frequently than before. People have no resources to fall on in lean years and to wait till the following harvest. They lack the courage born of unity and mutual assistance, to stop theft and robbery in their own village or to prevent the losses and the humiliation which may be inflicted on them at the time of police investigations into such crimes. And, last of all, what tragic conditions now prevail with regard to the supply of those food-stuffs which alone can give health and strength and thus keep disease at an arm's length! Ghee is adulterated, milk is dear, fish has become scarce and oil poisoned. The "Swadeshi diseases" now lord it over our liver and spleen. On top of this, exotic ones come like guests and in no time make a permanent settlement in our lives. Diphtheria, tuberculosis, typhoid—all have adopted a policy of exploitation towards an anæmic people. There is no food, no health, no joy, no hope. We quietly accept every misfortune, die without effort, attribute every injustice to Destiny and when danger befalls our near and dear ones, inertly abandon them to their fate. What is the cause of this helplessness? The roots with which the Society used to draw its nourishment, are now worm-eaten ; the soil which provided its sustenance, has now hardened into stone. The



system of customs and duties which used to ensure peace and happiness in villages, the birth-place and shelter of our people, has now crumbled to pieces. That is why the Village Society is now rushing on like an uprooted tree, with the remorseless tide of a new age.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing the Zemindars of the country Tagore then made an appeal in stirring words: Unless the Zemindars themselves undertake the task of infusing new life into the villages, it will never be fulfilled. Let there be no apprehension that their authority and their interests would be impaired, if the village, quickened to life, begins to feel its own strength. There is greater danger in keeping one side perpetually weak so that the other may indulge in an unbridled exercise of arbitrary power. The tenants ought to be educated and strengthened in such a way that the Zemindar may never have any temptation to do any injustice to them. For, after all, is he there simply to act like a miserable middleman and to keep open at all costs all the channels of collecting money from his tenants? How can he keep his own self-respect intact unless he maintains with care that noble relationship which results from sacrifices willingly borne on their behalf, unless he has the strength of character to incur generously all reasonable expenses for their welfare? Losses are considered to be no losses when money is spent to secure a royal title. Yet it is only among his own people that he can become a true king. For he is the master, friend and protector of a large number of people and is entrusted with the task of looking after their well-being. Will he not rise to the responsibilities of the exalted position which has been conferred on him?<sup>1</sup>

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

1. *Samuha*, pp. 103-104.



A similar appeal was then addressed to the newly awakened youth of Bengal: The call of the country is not the call of a single day. It is not in a particular place or on a particular occasion that your countrymen, like helpless orphans, are now deprived of their rights and are oppressed and cowed down with fear. Nor must you entertain any illusion that your own strength would be enough to protect them all. Whoever of you can and wherever you can, go and take charge of a village and organise it. Spread education and introduce new enterprise in the field of agriculture and the production of articles for everyday use. Infuse a new enthusiasm into the minds of the villagers so that their homes may look clean and tidy, healthy and beautiful. Devise suitable methods so that they may join hands with one another to discharge the duties of village life. Do not expect any appreciation for your work. Even the villagers themselves will put obstacles in your way and show distrust instead of gratitude. In this work there is no scope for excitement, nor for quarrel, nor self-advertisement. Instead you need an unlimited fund of patience and fellow-feeling and single-minded devotion, the one vow in your heart, namely, to share the sorrows of those who are the most miserable in this country and to dedicate your life to the task of uprooting the causes of this all-pervading misery.<sup>2</sup>

4

The echo of the Pabna address had hardly died down when the first political outrages were committed in the country. Politicians stood aghast. Tagore was shocked, but not surprised. With an unerring eye he had foreseen what things were coming to. The emotion of the youth had been

2. *Ibid.*, p. 107.



worked up as never before. Yet little effort had been made to start, *pari passu*, any solid work where it could find a healthy outlet. The excesses now committed were the logical outcome of the dynamic forces which were left unused, another example of "wasted steam".

When political leaders were fumbling in an atmosphere of bewilderment, Tagore delivered another memorable address on the "Path and the Wherewithal".<sup>1</sup> He called the country on to the great tasks which lay before it. That task was no less than the creation of a Greater India, the vision of which had inspired the best minds of the country for centuries. To weld together all the heterogeneous elements and to establish a living unity from one end of India to the other was the great mission in front of us, before which everything else shrank into insignificance. That mission could be fulfilled only with patient and devoted work of many years. In the task of evolving this unity "let us accept the bondage called British rule as an external factor though not inertly depending on it, let us through love and service build bridges over all artificial gulfs and bind together this disunited India with a system of veins and arteries. We have to undertake, on a collective basis, the work of creation in a thousand spheres in order to mould, with our own hands, a geographical territory into our Motherland and to evolve, through our own efforts, a Nation out of the peoples now divided from one another."<sup>2</sup>

This, then, was the message delivered by Tagore in those excited days. Since the publication of "Disease and its Cure" it was clear that he was gradually moving away from politics. Or was it the political movement which was moving

1. *Path-O-Pathey*, included in *Rajapraja*.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 136.



away from him? Tagore, as we have seen, had always regarded our politics as futile and unreal. Even when he appeared to be in it, he was, in fact, above it. As soon as the Swadeshi movement burst upon Bengal, he plunged into it, but only because he was spurred by a hope to guide it into constructive channels. The songs which he composed and sang in public and the new sacraments which he initiated, stimulated the emotional upheaval all over the province. But if he was the poet and musician and priest of the movement, he aspired to be its philosopher as well. He stirred up emotion, but at the same time sought to canalise it. His songs were counterbalanced by his solemn public utterances. For Tagore the two were complementary. His patriotism had its ballast in a programme of constructive work. From the very outset he pleaded, almost passionately, for moderation. Time and again he called his countrymen to follow the path, uphill and arduous as it was, of creative service and, above all, to come to immediate grips with the problems of rural Bengal. But the call evoked hardly any response. People greedily seized the emotional half of his contribution, but paid little heed to the other half, to his impassioned appeal to launch constructive work. What was, in these circumstances, more natural for a poet than to turn his mind with full force once again to that field which was pre-eminently his own?



## CHAPTER IV

### GORA

#### I

There now began a singularly creative period in Tagore's life. It was the age of *Geetanjali*. The patriot and nationalist now appeared to be submerged in the high tide of literary creation. Yet in many of the writings which appeared during this period, there is ample proof that he did not forget the village. For example, in *Gora*, his famous novel, which was begun in 1908 and was first published two years later, there are some unforgettable pages on rural life.<sup>1</sup>

Brought up and educated in Calcutta, Gora had so long lived in the well-to-do and cultured society of the city. He was, like Tagore himself, fully mature in age when he made his first excursion into villages. What he saw there came as a great shock. It was a new world altogether, so near the city and yet so far from it in every respect. "How divided, how narrow, how weak was this vast expanse of rural India, how supinely unconscious of its own power, how ignorant and indifferent as to its own welfare. The most trivial things looked so big to them ; the least of their tradition seemed so unbreakable. Without such an opportunity to see it for himself, Gora would never have been able even to imagine how inert were their minds, how petty their lives, how feeble their efforts."

1. English translation (1939, Indian Edition). See, in particular, Sections XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII and LXX.



The helplessness of the villagers and their inability to unite even to safeguard their own interests appeared to him almost incredible. Once a fire broke out in the village where Gora was staying. "He was astounded to see how utterly they failed to combine their resources even when faced by so grave a calamity. All was confusion, every one running hither and thither, weeping and wailing, without the least sign of method anywhere."

Years later Tagore, narrating his own experience in village life, referred to a similar incident. One day a fire had broken out in a neighbouring village. The villagers looked bewildered and could do nothing. Mohammedans from another village rushed in and put the fire out. There was no water near by and the thatched roofs had to be pulled down to bring the fire under control. "They have no idea about their own interests", added Tagore. "My men had to apply blows on them before they were allowed to break up the roofs. We need violence even to help them." After the fire had been extinguished the villagers came and expressed their gratitude. How fortunate it was, they said, that the Babus had broken up their houses and thereby saved them. They were obviously happy about the whole affair and appreciated that the blows which had fallen on them, were meant only for their good. "It was an appreciation that made me blush," added Tagore.<sup>1</sup>

Gora noticed that most of the people had no source of water supply in the immediate neighbourhood. The women had to walk long distances to fetch water for the household, but with an amazing indifference everybody put up with this daily hardship and even the comparatively well-off people would not for a moment think of digging a well for their own

1. *Prabashi, Bhadra* 1346 B.S., p. 662.



convenience. There had been fires before, but everyone had accepted them as visitations of Fate and no attempt was ever made to arrange for a nearer supply of water.

In the city Gora had lectured to people right and left to make them conscious of their duty. But lecturing appeared to him utterly out of place here. Villagers were completely ruled by blind habit. They had no power of thinking, not even of understanding their most pressing needs. It was a constant agony to him to be brought face to face "with this terrible load of ignorance, apathy and suffering, which had overwhelmed rich and poor, learned and ignorant alike, and clogged their advance at every step." And yet his companions who were themselves villagers, did not at all feel disturbed. They took it all for granted, and regarded it all as natural. It was only Gora's perturbation that struck them as unnatural.

Greater shocks were, however, in store for him. In search of a Hindu family he soon came across a barber's house. The latter gave him a vivid account of the tyranny of Indigo Planters and the inhuman treatment meted out by the police to the entire population of Ghosepara. Gora was deeply moved. But while he was listening intently to the story of this oppression, Ramapati, his attendant and himself a villager, was more and more losing patience. He was indignant at the recalcitrance of the villagers. It was, in his view, none of their business to throw a challenge to the police. They had made a parade of their courage in a spirit of bravado and, by their own foolhardiness, had brought upon themselves the wrath of the mighty officials. His sympathies were too obviously on the side of the sahibs.

When Gora expressed a desire to stay with the barber for some time, the latter, with folded hands, entreated him



not to do so as his house was already under police observation. The police would not dare do him any harm as long as he was there to protect him, Gora told him reassuringly. But the barber would not listen to him. "If you try to protect me, I shall indeed be a lost man" he replied pathetically and added, "because I see you really pity us, I make bold to tell you that if you try to prevent any of this police oppression while staying in my house, you will only get me into trouble."

Such reasoning passed Gora's comprehension. He had always imagined that to overcome evil all that was necessary was to take a firm stand on the side of right. Nor would his inflexible sense of duty allow him to leave the oppressed to their fate. The barber's attitude appeared to him one of undiluted cowardice and, filled with disgust, he left the place.

From there he went straight to the indigo factory to meet the rent collector, an unscrupulous but mealy-mouthed Brahmin, and in the presence of the police inspector took him severely to task for the outrageous acts committed at Ghosepara. As soon as Gora left the factory, a word was sent to the District Magistrate warning him that an obstinate young fellow was fomenting trouble in the locality. Gora next approached the Magistrate to plead on behalf of the oppressed people. But the latter, already prejudiced, cut him short and administered some sharp rebukes into the bargain.

A large number of villagers had been put into the lockup without regular trial, with a view to intimidating the rest by such wholesale punishment. With the help of a lawyer friend Gora made an application to the court to bail out the prisoners, but the Magistrate curtly turned it down. He argued excitedly with the lawyer that their case must



somehow be fought out, but the latter refused to throw down the gauntlet to the authorities as this could in his opinion only bring them into further trouble without in the least benefitting the sufferers.

Gora next got involved in a scuffle which had arisen between a batch of students and some constables on some trivial issue. As soon as he came to know that the students had been beaten by the constables without rhyme or reason, he rushed to their help, took active part in the fray and drove away the police, but as a result of this courageous stand he was immediately put into the lock-up.

In deep perturbation his friends came along and offered to try for bail, but Gora resolutely refused to take such a step. Nor would he entertain the idea of engaging a lawyer for himself. There followed a memorable debate on the system of justice prevailing in India. Obviously, through Gora, Tagore was expressing the views which had crystallised in his own mind as a result of his personal experience, above all, his deep-rooted conviction that under the existing system the dispensation of justice tended to be a one-sided affair, the balance being only too often tilted in favour of the strong.

After his release from gaol Gora made it a regular habit to pay frequent visits to villages, where as guests of low-caste people he would listen to the stories of their joys and sorrows. The keen interest which he took in their life often evoked their suspicion. But undeterred by such psychological obstacles he continued his explorations of village life.

The more he saw of it, the more was he struck by the force of custom in the village, which was far stronger here than in the educated community in which he had previously moved. Rural life, as he now discovered, was held in a perpetual social bondage. Every single activity was regulated in accordance with a set of hide-bound rules, the validity



of which nobody would ever think of questioning. Yet this implicit faith in tradition and the bondage of customs had not in the least given them strength. It had not produced any unity of purpose which could inspire them to stand shoulder to shoulder in times of calamity. On the contrary, tradition had become a weapon of exploitation which was frequently used against one's own fellow creature. It was a heartless system, in the name of which the most cruel extortions were made at social functions. For example, costly obsequies would have to be performed at a parent's funeral, irrespective of the ability of the son to bear the expenses. No wonder that they were often dreaded more than even the loss of a parent. Thus Society had become a tyrant, which instead of helping its members in times of need, pitilessly imposed the heaviest penalties on them.

It soon came to Gora's notice that among the lower castes there was a relative scarcity of women. It was practically impossible to obtain a girl for marriage without offering a large dowry. Many were, in consequence, compelled to remain life-long bachelors while others had to put off marriage until very late in life. Nevertheless, the ban on widow re-marriage would not be relaxed in the least. The evil results of this co-incidence were clear. Gora had always ardently upheld tradition and custom among his educated friends, but he now directed his attack against the existing social system. He succeeded in winning over the priests, but this exasperated the very people for whose benefit he was working. Gora's zeal for reform was to them but a proof of the low esteem in which he held them on account of their low caste. Otherwise he could not want them to lower their standard of conduct. If widow re-marriage were really such a good thing, the Brahmins, they argued, should first show the way.



During his wanderings in villages Gora also noticed that, for some reason or other, Mohammedans could unite far more easily than Hindus. He thought over the causes of this difference. The answer which came to his mind was anything but pleasant. He had to admit to himself, though not without a pang, that Mohammedans, unlike Hindus, were united by their religion and not merely by customs and traditions. Religion had made them one. That unity was constantly reinforced by their social functions which had not degenerated into soulless formalities. They had got hold of something which was positive, something for the sake of which they could, one and all, instantaneously spring to their feet and stand shoulder to shoulder.

As Gora moved about in rural surroundings a far-reaching change gradually came upon him. So long he had glorified tradition and justified all social institutions. He had seen things too much through his mind's eye. With his imagination he had painted them in rosy colours. He had offered subtle explanations for what was, in fact, simple and obvious. This habit was largely the outcome of the atmosphere of challenge in which he had lived and moved. Just because so many of his educated friends derided tradition and saw no trace of wisdom in it, his innate love of motherland prompted him to uphold it. As an inevitable reaction he had at times gone the length of defending, by a process of rationalisation, what was manifestly wrong. Their callous disregard roused him to furious opposition and with all the force of his powerful personality he had constantly sought to humble them. Victory in such debates was to him only a victory for motherland, a vindication of her honour.

In the villages he had nothing to prove. There was not the remotest suggestion of challenge. Nobody even



dreamed of questioning tradition. Here he was but a mute spectator of the stark realities which surrounded him. The effects of custom which were writ large on village life, could no longer escape his notice. The crusader's zeal was hushed. His approach became more and more objective and the web of delusion which he had spun around him with his logic and his imagination, was now blown off. A revaluation of customs became inevitable. He now learnt to assess tradition for what it was worth.

Is it possible that the changes which thus came upon Gora have a relevance to the evolution of Tagore's own thoughts? For, as will be seen later, there was a perceptible shift in emphasis in Tagore's own social philosophy as compared with what he had advocated earlier. Be that as it may, in Gora's encounters in villages one can hear an unmistakable echo of Tagore's own experience. In many places he has put his own words in his hero's mouth and has lavishly bestowed on him just those qualities—fearlessness, fellow-feeling and an inflexible spirit of service—which are the hall-mark of a true servant of the country. There is no doubt that in Gora Tagore created a hero after his heart, for whom he had looked in vain in the world of realities.

2

There are further indications that Tagore, even when absorbed in his literary work, did not give up the thought of rural uplift. In April 1914 he acquired the site in village Surul, about a mile and a half from Santiniketan, on which now stands the institute of Sriniketan.

Early in 1915 he was associated with Bengal Social Service League<sup>1</sup> and delivered three lectures bearing on the

1. *Bangeeya Hitasadhan Mandal*.



question of rural uplift. He chalked out a programme for the Society (January, 1915), which included the following items: to teach the illiterate reading, writing and arithmetic ; to arrange small classes and publish pamphlets in order to promote public health, initiate people in first aid, nursing, etc. ; to organise collective effort to counteract malaria, tuberculosis, dispepsia and other diseases ; to devise and adopt methods to prevent infant mortality ; to make arrangements in villages for good drinking-water ; to establish co-operative credit societies and demonstrate its utility to the people ; and to organise public help in all possible ways in times of famine, flood and epidemic.

In the second lecture<sup>1</sup> Tagore said *inter alia* : the prosperous nations of the world now roll in wealth. We are born in rags. To us has been entrusted the sacred task of alleviating poverty and suffering. That is why we are born in the midst of want and ignorance and disease.

In the third lecture entitled "Rural Uplift"<sup>2</sup> occurs a striking passage: the minds of the educated now soar in the realm of thought, like clouds in the sky, far away from the earth. The two could be brought together in a fruitful union only if they were to melt and descend in the shape of rain. The new monsoon of this new age will have come in vain, if all this imposing preparation roams on in the sky only in wind and vapour. Not that there has been no shower, but the fields have not been ploughed. Nobody yet pays any attention to those places which alone, if properly irrigated by ideas, can grow a rich crop. This gray, dry, parched earth, gaping in thirst, is now sending

1. *Karmajajna* or the Sacred Rite of Work, published in *Sabuj Patra* (Falgun, 1321 B.S.).

2. *Palleer Unnati* or Rural Uplift, *Prabashi* (Baisakh, 1322 B.S.). See also *Sanibarar Chithi* (Asvin, 1348 B.S., pp. 906-8).



up to the heavens its tearful cry: 'Your grand display of ideas, all your stored-up knowledge, it can only be for me. Give it to me! Oh let me have it! Prepare me to receive it all! I shall give it all back a hundredfold.' The burning sighs of mother Earth have at long last reached the heavens, the rains will set in soon. It is now high time to get to the cultivation of the soil.

Tagore was now engaged in writing his "Home and the World". Though this novel primarily deals with social questions we find in it a significant reference to rural work. Nikhiles, in his college days, had persuaded himself that the demand for various commodities should be met from indigenous sources. He had spent large sums on several amateurish experiments such as the production of sugar out of date-juice, agricultural improvements and the establishment of a village bank.<sup>1</sup>

Just at this time Tagore was feeling more restless than ever for constructive work upon which he had set his heart. The progress so far made at Santiniketan did not come up to his expectation. His literary work continued with unabated vigour, but there lurked in him all the same a feeling of discontentment. Somewhere in all his activities he sensed a big gap. It was in this state of mind that he returned, after a good many years, to his Zemindari in North Bengal and sought to give a new impetus to the work which had already been launched there.

1. *Ghare-Baire*, *Rabindra-Rachanabali* or *Collected Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 154.



## CHAPTER V

### MAKE THEM STRONG

#### I

In 1894, that is, soon after Tagore had begun to visit the Zemindari, appeared his well-known story called "Clouds and Sunshine".<sup>1</sup> While it was essentially a piece of literary creation, the choice of the theme and the incidents narrated therein reveal the deep impression which experience in rural life had already made on his mind. Wrongs were being daily perpetrated in villages, yet there appeared to be no remedy. Young Sasibhushan, a graduate in law then living in a village, made a determined stand against such wrongs on three occasions. His courage was, however, of little avail. Every time he was baffled and in the end had to suffer five years of imprisonment. Indeed it was no easy matter for him to help the wronged. The victims would much rather put up with an injustice than fight for its redress. The troubles and expenses that would be involved in seeking justice, were too much for them. Moreover, they were, one and all, afraid to incur the wrath of the ruling class lest it should bring upon them a new load of oppression. Eye witnesses would plead ignorance or recklessly distort the truth in the court. Even the sufferers themselves would side with the accused and leave in the lurch the very person who had offered to fight for them.

1. Included in *Galpaguchha* or Collected Stories, Vol. II.



Ten years previously Tagore, in a paper entitled "In Actual Practice", had pleaded that, instead of indulging in mere talks, it was far more fruitful and far more effective to save at least one man from the hands of his oppressor. First-hand experience now revealed to him how difficult it was to translate that injunction into practice. Individual courage was not enough. The cowardly attitude of the victims of injustice presented almost an insuperable obstacle.

In the same year, in which "Clouds and Sunshine" was published, Tagore wrote two striking essays<sup>1</sup> dealing with the same subject. What he had vividly illustrated through the hero of that story, was more clearly and forcefully stated in the concluding lines of "How to Ensure Justice": The very man for whose welfare you would perhaps stake your life, might in his weakness become a source of danger. You could never be sure of receiving the right response from him even to help him. The coward would deny the truth, the persecuted would hide their suffering, the law would remorselessly raise its iron fist while the gates of the prison-house would open wide to engulf you.<sup>2</sup>

The District Magistrate of Khulna had assaulted an ordinary clerk. This incident provided the immediate inducement to write the other article entitled "How to End Humiliation". Tagore deprecated the weak-kneed attitude of his countrymen as severely as the high-handed dealings of British officials. Their cowardice was a perpetual invitation to violence. Six years later he gave vent to the same feeling in the memorable lines: He who does wrong

1. *Apamaner Pratikar* and *Subicharer Adhikar*, included in the collection of Essays called *Rajapraja* or King and his Subjects.

2. *Rajapraja* (1339 B.S.), p. 63.



and he who puts up with it, may both be burnt like straw in the fire of Thy rage.

What were the causes of this meek submission which had become almost a national habit? Unlike others, Tagore did not attribute it entirely or even primarily to political subjection. With characteristic insight he detected its main roots in our own social organisation which had become the breeding-ground of a servile spirit. Our society is split up into layers and in every layer there are masters and servants. These masters at every step demand wholesale subservience from their subordinates. Fear and slavery have thus been ingrained in us. Here lies the ultimate cause of our personal and national humiliation. We have yet to learn the distinction between obedience and subservience. One may show proper devotion to the master, behave respectfully towards superiors, and yet retain, as a human being, a minimum of self-respect. Our society, however, makes constant inroads from all directions into that minimum, thus crippling our manhood. The first task is to restore a sense of self-respect in individuals or instil it into them. Only when, in family surroundings as well as in social life, we shall have regained our lost manhood, will an official really respect us and no longer dare treat us discourteously. We must respect our own people before we can expect others to respect them.<sup>1</sup>

2

As we have seen, the central points of "Clouds and Sunshine" recur in *Gora*. Like Sasibhushan, *Gora* sought to fight in the law-court on behalf of the oppressed, but

1. How to End Humiliation. *Rajapraja*, pp. 55-56.



discovered that the law was mightier than justice. Like Sasibhushan he rushed to protect the victims of wrong, but was disillusioned to find that they were afraid of the law. In the face of the strongest provocation both of them were once carried away by indignation, and, regardless of consequences, took up the law into their own hands, but in the end both had to suffer imprisonment in reward for their courage to fight injustice.

In the Pabna address Tagore made some remarkable observations bearing on the same subject.<sup>1</sup> In his appeal to the Zemindars he emphasised that it was essentially not a question of spending large sums for the welfare of the ryot: "I shall never forget the lesson which I once learnt. At one time while supervising a Zemindari in muffasil I came to learn that some high police officer had inflicted heavy losses on a group of fishermen and had begun to harass the villagers on the excuse of police investigation. I called the fishermen, asked them to start civil or criminal proceedings against the oppressors, and assured them that I would get a big lawyer from Calcutta to conduct the case. With folded hands they said, 'Sir, what would be the good of winning the case? If we take a stand against the police, we shall simply be driven out of our homes.' I thought over it and realised that for the weak even to win was as good as to lose—the operation might be wonderful, but the faint-hearted patient would die in the process. Since then I had to admit to myself over and over again that there is only one real gift, namely, the gift of strength. All other gifts come ultimately to nothing."

Tagore then wittily referred to a significant story. A kid once approached the Creator and asked him in tears—

1. See *Samuha*, pp. 104-106.



“Lord, why does everybody down below on earth always want to eat me up?” “My child”, replied the Creator, “how can I blame others? Your very appearance is an invitation to me to handle you in the same fashion.”

“Even gods”, stressed Tagore, “cannot ensure that in this world the weak will get justice and protection.” Good intention is of little help. Law alone is no safeguard for the weak. As soon as it comes into contact with them, its standard is lowered and the police becomes an obsession.

“Hence my appeal to the Zemindars of Bengal”, he went on, “educate your tenants, make them healthy and powerful so that they may protect themselves from others and from themselves. Otherwise no good laws or well-intentioned authority will be able to save them. The mouth of all will water at the very sight of them. And if the vast majority of our people can be mishandled, as they now are, by the Zemindar, the moneylender, the kanungo, the staff of the court and a host of others, how can we ever expect to make kings out of our countrymen before helping them to attain manhood?”

It is not simply on moral grounds that Tagore condemns a system which keeps large sections of the community in a perpetual state of ignorance and helplessness. It is a fatal error to think that only the ignorant and the helpless are the real sufferers. Weakness, he insists, is infectious, which spreads like a disease and inevitably undermines the strong. Healthy relations, he has stressed in many places, can grow only here something approaching equality of strength exists among different social groups. There can be no greater misfortune than to have to deal with the weak. Our society has kept the masses permanently impotent and thereby it has sapped its own strength. When you snatch away the



weapon of others, your own becomes reckless. There lies the downfall of man.<sup>1</sup>

This brings us to a cardinal principle of Tagore's social and political philosophy, a warning which he has uttered in many places and on many occasions ; the weak in their weakness can do no less harm to the strong than the strong in their strength to the weak. It is in this context that one can grasp the full meaning of another memorable utterance of Tagore which, significantly enough, came in the same year in which "Gora" was published: O my wretched Land, in humiliation shalt Thou be brought down to the level of those whom Thou hast humiliated. Those whom Thou hast left behind, are now holding Thee back.

1. *Lokahita* or Social Welfare, written in 1914 and included in the collection of essays called *Kalantar* or the New Age. See 1344 B.S. Edition, p. 40.



## CHAPTER VI

### GIVE THEM EDUCATION

#### I

Thus there is, in Tagore's view, only one way of protecting the weak, namely, to give them strength. The most effective way of giving strength is, according to him, to impart proper education. No wonder that all through his life he remained an ardent champion of mass education and untiringly harped upon this point whenever he spoke or wrote on our social questions.

In an essay on "Social Welfare" written in 1914<sup>1</sup>, he examined the content of this term and came to the conclusion that the welfare of the people could be safeguarded only if they were made literates.

In Western countries masses are now organised. They have ceased to beg ; they now claim. Public attention is being increasingly focussed on their needs. It has become a clash of one strong party against another. The masses have succeeded in making it a necessity for the government to listen to their demands instead of continuing to depend on its mercy. As a result their interests can no longer be ignored.

Our people are as yet not conscious of their own strength. That is why they cannot make their strength felt by others. If we try to know them only through the medium of English books, as we have done hitherto, and that, too, out of pity, our attitude would never lead to any

1. Already cited, see *Kalantar*.



abiding results. Our people still look upon their want and misery as individual and isolated. Had they been aware that the suffering of one is but a part of the suffering of millions, then alone would it become a real problem for the society, then alone would Society come to grips with it, not out of any consideration of mercy but in sheer self-defence. Interest for others can be real, says Tagore, only when others can force us to feel interested in them.

The well-to-do classes in this country can now live in comfort only because the people have not yet become self-conscious. That is why the Zemindar can oppress them, the moneylender harass them, the master abuse them, the police exploit them, the priest pat them on the back, the lawyer dig holes in their pockets while they helplessly lay the blame at the door of Fate. The utmost that we now do is to urge, in the name of religion, the Zemindar to do his duty, the moneylender to reduce his interest rates, the police to stop oppression. This is as good as fetching water in a sieve ; however much you may try to stop the holes with your palm, the results are bound to prove disappointing. Such improvisation can serve a momentary purpose, but can never provide an abiding solution. Mercy can never move society to great exertion. Its hands have to be forced.

The people must therefore be made to feel a bond of unity among themselves. That is the first task. For this purpose it is essential to teach them how to read and write. Mere literacy may not be enough, but it would go a long way in that direction. It would open up, as it were, a new path along which the mind would be able to move some distance. The greater the movement of the mind, the higher does a man rise in stature. If you want to give him strength, you must, first of all, extend his horizon.



What he will read and what he will write once he has acquired literacy, is a secondary question. The primary consideration is that he will be able to hear what others have to say and to make his own say heard by others. He will then begin to feel that he is a part of a bigger whole. The elbow-room of his mind will be widened. His consciousness will have a chance to spread in all directions.

If the masses in Europe are now well organised, it is not because the average man has reached a high level of learning. Popular education in Europe may be shallow, but it is extensive. It has enabled people to reach one another, it has established a line of communication from heart to heart. But for the spread of general education masses could never be so effectively organised and without organisation they could never wield the power with which they now back up their demands.

Similarly, our people must receive education, or to put it at its bare minimum, they must learn to read and write. Literacy when confined to a few, has not much value, but if it were to include all within its ambit, it could, like an ordinary wear of everyday use, cover the shame of our country.

If we proceed to give education to the people in the spirit of doing them a favour, we shall hardly achieve anything. We must recognise that masses, just like the upper classes, have a right to education. So long they have been deprived of this right and we are now paying the penalty for the cumulative effects of that injustice. Because we have kept them weak and dependent on our mercy, they are bringing us down. To save ourselves from this danger we must strengthen those who now live in the lowest strata of the society. Masses have to be made powerful for our sake as much as their own. This can be possible only



when they have a means to achieve unity among themselves. Without general literacy such unity can never be possible.

## 2

In a paper on the "Spread of Education",<sup>1</sup> Tagore recalled a distressing sight which, while living in villages, he had seen during the hot weather year after year: The water of the river had gone down, its banks had cracked, the layer of mud had come out in the tanks, hot sands stretched over long distances. Village women would come from far off to fill their pitchers in the river. That water was mingled with the tears of Bengal. If a fire started in the village, there was no means to put it out. If a cholera epidemic broke out, there was no means to stop it.

That was one side of the picture. There was another which moved him no less deeply: In the evening the peasants would return home after a hard day's work. Darkness now descended on the fields around. The villages, hidden behind bamboo groves, appeared like islands of darkness in the dismal quiet of the night. From there would come the jarring sound of a primitive musical instrument accompanied by the monotonous note, in which a harsh voice repeated a single line times without number. Here too the water seemed to have descended to its bottom and the heart run dry. Heat was increasing, but how poor, how ineffective was the means to quench it!

How can people live, asks Tagore, if they have to grovel year after year in misery without an opportunity to feel at times that there is, after all, something left in them

1. Read at the University of Calcutta in 1933, embodied in the collection of essays called *Siksha* or Education. See in particular pp. 240-41, (1342 B.S. Edition).



called mind, where, after the hard toil for a livelihood, they could find relief from humiliation and escape from the slavery of misfortune? There was a time when provision was made in this country for their joy and recreation. Society in those days did not disown them. It knew well enough that, if they were to go down, it would also suffer the same fate. But now the water-sources have dried up and starvation of the mind has become their common lot. Nobody cares to bring them any relief. The spread of indigenous education has stopped so that drought in the field of knowledge has become a permanent feature of their life. The new education never flowed over the country as a whole. From the start it remained confined to a limited number of isolated centres.

## 3

The old system of popular education, says Tagore in another place,<sup>1</sup> was not an ideal one. Modern science and knowledge were not available then, nor the present-day facilities for teaching. All enterprise was small in scale, varieties were limited, comforts and conveniences were lacking. But the life-blood circulated freely over the whole body. Religious and social functions were the principal means of education. They enriched rural life and established some kind of unity of mind and outlook all over the country.

The old system has died out through long neglect while nothing has so far been substituted in its place. The new system of education has remained a privilege of a small section. The lucky few live, as it were, in a few intellectual

1. Address delivered at Sriniketan, included in *Russiar Chithi* or Letters from Russia, Appendix 2.



islands with deep separation around them. Foreign education has made them foreign to the people of the country. The result has been tragic for the Society. Signs of paralysis can now be clearly seen in some of its vital limbs. Now and then voices are heard that something must be done to remedy this evil. Hands, however, do not move even when voices become loud. In the field of education nowhere else is to be found such extensive provision for starvation as in India.

This complete lack of popular education has sharpened the conflict of interests between town and village. It has split up the nation into two and thrown a wall of separation between them.' This dichotomy of our national life, says Tagore, was strikingly illustrated during the days of the last political movement. Seized by a fleeting idealism students left educational institutions *en masse* and rushed into villages to serve them. But they failed completely to unite with villagers while these in their turn looked upon them with apathy and suspicion, if not open hostility.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, because of their aloofness from village life, the educated do not realise that the advice they render to the village people is not always sound. Boastfully conscious of their book knowledge, they are too apt to take for granted their fitness to guide. Tagore quotes an example from his own experience to show how the empirical wisdom of an illiterate cultivator can be superior to purely academic knowledge. Once he wanted to introduce at Silaidah the cultivation of potatoes on a commercial scale. He was told by the authorities of the Agricultural

1. From an address delivered at the anniversary of Sriniketan in February, 1940. For its substance which was authorised by Tagore, see *Prabashi, Falgun* 1346 B.S., pp. 662-63.



Department that to grow potatoes on a particular plot earmarked for the purpose, no less than a hundred maunds of manure would be required. He followed this advice and potatoes were grown, but there was absolutely no rational proportion between expenditure and income. A cultivator, who was a tenant of the Tagore estate, then asked for his permission to grow potatoes. He completely ignored the Department's instructions and yet raised a bumper crop, thus putting them all to shame.<sup>1</sup>

In no other country, says Tagore, does there exist such an invidious distinction between cities and villages as regards proper facilities for education. This distinction has bred a supercilious attitude among the educated while this attitude has rendered their education largely useless both for villagers and for themselves. Hence he repeatedly appealed not to look down upon the village people. Let there be no narrow-mindedness, he urged, in making provision for their education. Let us not assume in our vanity, as people sometimes do, that the needs of the "rustics" are limited, that little is enough for them, and then proceed to ration education with a niggardly hand. It is not merely for town-dwellers that education is now badly needed ; it must flow with equal vigour over the countryside. Our greatest need to-day is equality in this field.<sup>2</sup>

4

Tagore was thus fully aware of the imperfections of the present system of education. Education, in his view, was the problem before the country. On it he pinned all his hopes of national regeneration. Nobody else in modern

1. *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.*



India has given so much thought to it, analysed its problems with so much insight and sought to guide it along right lines with so much fervour. Reform and not boycott, more and not less education was his motto. And in all the proposals for the reform of education which he set forth in a series of invaluable essays and addresses, he boldly accorded the first place to his plea for the adoption of the principle of universal popular education.

That plea found its most powerful expression in his "Letters from Russia". "In my view", he said in one of these letters, "the imposing tower of misery which to-day rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation in the absence of education. Caste divisions, religious conflicts, aversion to work, precarious economic conditions—all centre round this single factor. The Report of the Simon Commission gives us a long list of India's sins. At the end it admits one shortcoming of the British rule, namely, the lack of adequate provision for education. But for me that was enough.<sup>1</sup> The Simon Commission, he thought, should have done well if it had visited Russia before coming to India on its mission.

He criticised the education cess which had just been imposed in Bengal. A tax which is meant for the welfare of the country should, in his opinion, be paid by all. The exchequer could bear all the expenses of a top-heavy administration which was preoccupied almost exclusively with the maintenance of law and order, but had little to spare for the education of the people. The new cess underlined once again our utter indifference to the cause of popular education.

"I am now nearing seventy", he said in another letter.

1. *Russiar Chithi* or Letters from Russia, p. 85.



“So far I did not lose patience. As I looked at the intolerable load of ignorance in our country, I mainly blamed our destiny. With very little resources I tried very small remedies and continued that work in the teeth of the indifference of my countrymen and with a little, though mainly verbal, patronage from the authorities.”<sup>1</sup> By implication, Tagore was at last losing patience. The reason was clear. He had himself seen the remarkable achievements in new Russia. “Had I not seen it with my own eyes”, he said, “I could never have believed that they have not only taught the alphabet to hundreds of thousands of men within a decade, but have imparted to them the dignity of man.”<sup>2</sup> He could no longer regard the all-round backwardness of the Indian villages as inevitable, as the cruel dispensation of an inexorable fate. It was all man-made misery and was capable of solution through human efforts, if only there were the requisite will.

1. *Ibid*, p. 90-91.

2. *Ibid*, p. 100.



## CHAPTER VII

# RESTORE BALANCE BETWEEN CITY AND VILLAGE

### I

The migration of people to towns, as pointed out in reproducing the central ideas of "Swadeshi Samaj", has been one of the main causes of the breakdown of the village society. That is, however, by no means a typically Indian phenomenon. A basic maladjustment between city and village can be noticed in every country. Indeed the so-called village problem is not a problem of the village as such. It is very largely the outcome of a blind pull of urban forces, which in its turn is an inevitable concomitant of a profit civilisation. At bottom it is a question of restoring the balance between city and village. Such balance, again, depends, in the last analysis, on a proper relationship between the pursuit of wealth and the pursuit of happiness or between "civilisation" and "culture" strictly so called. A readjustment between city and village therefore calls for a corresponding readjustment in our values and our outlook.

An analysis of Tagore's thoughts on rural reconstruction would not be complete without a close examination of what he considers to be the normal relationship between city and village. Luckily, he has left us a comprehensive statement of his views on the subject in a valuable publi-



cation in English.<sup>1</sup> No apology is needed for quoting extensively from this source in order to illustrate his thoughts as far as possible in his own words.

Cities, Tagore admits, fulfil an essential function in human civilisation, but their exaggerated importance is a symptom of some deep-seated disease in the body politic. "A tumour, round which blood is congested, is the enemy of the whole body upon which it feeds as it swells. Our modern cities, in the same way, feed upon the whole social organism that runs through the villages ; they continually drain away the life-stuff of the community, and slough off a huge amount of dead matter, while assuming a lurid counterfeit of prosperity."<sup>2</sup>

In "Luxury's Noose" Tagore returned to the same theme and, using a similar metaphor, said: If the blood deceives the body and rushes to the mouth, it would not be a sign of health. If our birth-places, the centres of religion and of cordial friendship, are constantly starved in order to feed fat the centres of pleasure and amusement, the country may outwardly look prosperous, but it would only be our ruin in disguise.<sup>3</sup> It is, to use Prof. Laski's phrase in a slightly different context, a clear case of "plethora at the centre and anæmia at the circumference".

An ideal relationship between city and village would benefit both. Their functions are complementary and not of mutual exploitation. "From the one flow food and health and fellow-feeling, from the other return gifts of

1. "City and Village", Viswabharati Bulletin No. 10 (December 1928). Part of it was published as a Foreword to "Reconstruction and Education in Rural India" by Dr. Prem Chand Lal, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1932, pp. 262.

2. *Ibid*, p. 18.

3. Concluding lines of Luxury's Noose, *Samaj*, p. 134.



wealth, knowledge and energy.' The civilisation which comprises only or mainly the village cannot advance very far. There the individual is unimportant, the community predominant. On the other hand, where the town dominates, the individual is all-powerful and the community negligible. "There civilisation burns itself up with its own fires ; and the more brilliantly it flashes out for the time, the blacker becomes its fuel, until at last it is reduced to ashes."¹

Until the advent of modern times, some sort of balance was maintained between town and village. Even big towns were relatively moderate in size. In the main they served as political and commercial centres. Production was decentralised and was largely carried on in rural surroundings. The instruments of production were as yet simple. Much depended on the skill of the artisan who was not seldom inspired by a joy of creation. The products of exquisite beauty were largely a projection of his own heart. A give-and-take relation prevailed between town and village.

Modern machine burst upon such a system with all its disruptive influences. The balance was upset. Machine production brought in its wake the "greed of gain" which created a sharp divergence between individual and collective interest. The gulf between the rich and the poor became wider. Production increased, but largely at the expense of the joy of creation.

Rich and poor there always have existed. But, as Tagore points out, certain forces, at least in this country, set limits to the gulf between them. Apart from the technique of production which made impossible the accu-

1. "City and Village", pp. 4-5.



mulation of wealth in a few hands on anything like the modern scale, social values provided certain more or less effective safeguards. In India "riches came last in order of merit". Besides, as already pointed out, the rich had social responsibilities. The enjoyment of wealth could not be too exclusive. "The riches of one meant the welfare of many."<sup>1</sup>

The task before us is "to make whole the broken-up communal life", to restore the balance between country and town. But Tagore is not an advocate of the boycott of machine. "The machine is also an organ of our vital force—it is man's very own." True it has misbehaved in the past and has more often than not inflicted grievous wrongs. But that has been due to man's inability to wield, according to his own will, the instrument of production which he himself has created. Our task is to master it **and** not to boycott it. "This latest manifestation of man's power", he says, "must be brought into the heart of our villages. It is because we have omitted to do so that our water sources run dry ; malaria and disease, want and sin and crime stalk the land ; a cowardly resignation overwhelms us. If we can but gain the science that gives power to this age, we may yet win ; we may yet live."<sup>2</sup> Thus, in Tagore's view, the crisis in the relationship between town and village can be solved only when a remedy has been found for the crisis in the relationship between man and machine.

In modern urban life there is a fatal confusion of ends and means. The city represents as it were the professional aspect of human civilisation. "People have their homes in

1. *Ibid*, p. 6.

2. *Ibid*, p. 9-10.



the village and their offices in the city.” The office is there “for serving and enriching home”. That is the only rational relationship between the two. But now-a-days the office grows at the expense of the home because people in an endless pursuit of wealth pour all the joy of home life “into the hungry jaws of the office.”<sup>1</sup>

People do not realise that acquisition because of its bigness does not produce happiness ; that movement does not constitute progress merely because of its velocity, that progress can have meaning only in relation to some ideal of completeness.

In many cases land has been ruthlessly exploited. This process of plunder “has outstripped nature’s power of recuperation”. The strain has been too great for Mother Earth who has “enough for the healthy appetite of her children and something extra for rare cases of abnormality”, but who “has not nearly enough for the sudden growth of a whole world of spoilt and pampered children.”<sup>2</sup>

Man has thus been “digging holes into the very foundations not only of his livelihood, but also of his life”. The results of this short-sightedness are writ large on the countryside where “the light of life is being dimmed, the joy of existence dulled, the natural threads of social communion snapped every day”. It is high time to arrest this baneful process, this constant drain of wealth from the countryside to the city, which ends by impoverishing both.

With a telling analogy in which he compares villages to women, Tagore seeks to drive this lesson home. “It is the function of village, like that of women, to provide people with their elemental needs, with food and joy, with the simple

1. *Ibid*, p. 19.

2. *Ibid*, p. 23.



poetry of life, and with those ceremonies of beauty which the village spontaneously produces and in which she finds delight. But when constant strain is put upon her through the extortionate claims of ambition, when her resources are exploited through the excessive stimulus of temptation, then she becomes poor in life, her mind becomes dull and uncreative ; and from her time-honoured position of the wedded partner of the city, she is degraded to that of maid-servant.”<sup>1</sup> This degradation is the more tragic because man’s vision is so completely blinded by ambition that he is not even aware of the loss which he inflicts upon himself.

In the interest of civilisation as well as in the interest of our own happiness, the subservient position of village has to be ended. Its social status must be raised to that of equal partnership with city, to which it is entitled. This would be possible only if we “bring to the villages health and knowledge, wealth of space in which to live, wealth of time in which to work and to rest and to enjoy.”<sup>2</sup>

It should be clear by now what, in Tagore’s view, would be the ideal relation between city and village. That ideal has been beautifully explained with the help of another analogy which has been used by him on several occasions: “Streams, lakes and oceans are there on this earth. They exist not for the hoarding of water exclusively within their own areas. They send up the vapour which forms into clouds and helps towards a wider distribution of rain. Cities have their functions of maintaining wealth and knowledge in concentrated forms of opulence ; but this also should not be for their own sake ; they should be centres of irrigation ; they should gather in order to distribute ; they should not

1. *Ibid*, p. 16.

2. *Ibid*, p. 23.



magnify themselves, but should enrich the entire commonwealth. They should be like lamp posts, and the light they support must transcend their own limits.''<sup>1</sup>

Thus if Tagore is averse to a romantic denial of the machine, he is, equally, no advocate of a mere back-to-the-village policy. The exigencies of modern life, he knows, rules out such a simple solution. He even welcomes the dynamic forces out of which modern towns grow. Here as elsewhere he remains an advocate of harmony. Towns and villages in this country have been drifting apart more and more. He wants to arrest this process. Even a town-dweller, he knows, can give a great deal to the village if he has a heart to do so. Certainly there is no need to repudiate one's contact with the village home. We must live a life which is, so to say, true to the kindred point of city and village.

We may earn in the outside world, but must spend at home ; we may use our strength in far-off places, but the heart must remain at home ; we may have to go far for our education, but must apply our learning at home. This is the proper relation between the home and the world outside. We must be on our guard lest it should become topsyturvy.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Ibid*, p. 23-24.

2. *Swadeshi Samaj, Samuha* p. 7.



## CHAPTER VIII

### GIVE WITH RESPECT

#### I

“Swadeshi Samaj” was written in 1904. Thirty-five years later, just two years before he left us, Tagore came, for the last time, to live at Sriniketan. One evening he called the workers of the Institute and gave them a talk<sup>1</sup> on its history and its ideals. Though it was but an informal talk, it remains one of the best and most authentic accounts he has left us on his first experience in villages. Of particular interest was his analysis of the character of the village people. Quoting several incidents from his early experience he showed how the people looked down upon themselves, how completely they lacked self-confidence, how ignorant they were of their own welfare, how they would rather themselves suffer than see a neighbour get some advantage and, lastly, how a fatalistic outlook of life reinforced their helplessness and misery.

The concluding words were typical of a lifelong idealist: “Last of all I want to tell you one thing. We should, above all, try to rouse a force which will work among them from within. This was my thought when I wrote ‘Swadeshi Samaj’. I then wanted to point out that it was not necessary to trouble about the whole country. I cannot singlehanded

1. The substance of this talk was published in the form of an article authorised by Tagore himself, in *Prabashi* (Bhadra, 1346 B.S.). An English translation was also published in the *Modern Review* (November, 1941).



bear the responsibility for the whole of India. I shall conquer only one or two tiny villages. For that one must win their mind and gather the strength for working together with them. The task is not easy. It is a hard, uphill journey. But if I can liberate two or three villages from the bondage of ignorance and incapacity, then on a small scale an ideal would be established for the whole of India. I thought of all this then and I am thinking of it even now.

“We must liberate these few villages in every respect so that all may receive education, a breeze of joy may blow once again, songs and music, recitation from epics and scriptures may fill them, as of yore. Mould just these few villages in this way and I shall call them my India. Then alone real India will be ours.”

These words fell from his lips, clear and almost aglow with the warmth of his heart. We sat spellbound and gazed at his face. His eyes, half-closed as if in meditation, seemed to visualise some remote future. Tagore knew well the India of to-day, but he had another India in his heart. All through his life he held aloft, before his own eyes and those of others, the vision of India as she should be. Age had dimmed his eye-sight, but not that vision. In the midst of disappointments he did not surrender the hope that the India of his heart would some day come true.

## 2

Here as elsewhere, the emphasis was laid on three points: Life must be developed in all its varied aspects. The people must be induced to exert themselves. Rural life must again be made cheerful. An all-round regeneration of village life with the active co-operation of the people so that life in the village may again radiate with joy—this, then,



was Tagore's ideal in rural reconstruction. "Our object is to try to flood the choked bed of village life with the stream of happiness. For this the scholars, the poets, the musicians, the artists, have to collaborate, to offer their contributions."<sup>1</sup>

With his broad and deep interest in human life Tagore was ever anxious lest anything pertaining to life should receive less attention than it deserved. He regarded an individual as an end in himself. In his eyes every life was destined to blossom into a flower of joy and beauty and he could not bear the thought that a single petal should be lost and impair the glory of the whole. Nothing was therefore more natural than that he should set his heart on a full revival of village life in every sphere.

There was, however, a more practical meaning in this insistence. He knew that no regeneration could be real unless it was all-round. Life is indivisible. Consequently, the scheme of reform must be comprehensive if it is to succeed. The effects of neglect in one sphere can easily be transmitted to other spheres and stultify all efforts at reconstruction. The official method of tackling village problems in a piecemeal fashion appeared to him both unsound and ineffective. Apart from the question of overlapping and lack of co-ordination, life was compartmentalised and its organic unity lost. It could not be viewed as a whole because each officer was concerned only with a part. Yet unless life was viewed as a whole it could not be seen in the proper perspective so that there was always a danger that the emphasis would not be laid in the right place or in the right degree. Lastly, the administrative machinery suffered from the grave handicap that it was, after all, a machinery. It was devoid of any true feelings because it lacked the throb



of life. If life was to be reinstalled where Death had spread its pall of gloom far and wide, living forces must be at work which could rouse the slumbering spirit. The official machinery from its very nature was inadequate for the purpose. No bond of feeling and comradeship could grow between the official and the people, though without such a bond there could be no abiding success in the work of rural reconstruction.

Tagore himself has in many places invoked the spirit of service and sacrifice. But his ideal of service was different from that which was, and even now is, upheld by many humanitarian souls. In a unique way he combined his humanitarianism with his individualism and, one may perhaps add, his sense of realism. He considered it both unwise and wrong in principle to attempt to do everything for others. No missionary zeal would be enough to serve in this way all the villages of India. The most dauntless spirit of sacrifice is likely to shrink before the appalling magnitude of the task. Even if it were to forge recklessly ahead, how could it rid all the villages of filth and dirt, of poverty and disease? And if all this were achieved by a gigantic effort, where was the guarantee that life in village would not relapse into the same state of misery?

Moreover, such service might testify to the nobility of those who serve, but it would keep those who are served in a state of perpetual helplessness and dependence on others. Nothing could be more prejudicial to the development of the individual than such dependence. Self-exertion is the condition of growth. How could the individual be brought to full blossoming if he were to be lulled in an effortless existence?

Tagore knew that we could not, as no nation can, dispense with the spirit of service. But he never ceased to



stress that the best and most real service was that which was directed to awaken the mind and to call forth its latent energies. "I shall not be happy", said Tagore in a ringing voice, "simply to know that the villager now spins a pound and a half of yarn where he used to spin only one pound, or that he now gets from the land a maund and a half of paddy where he used to get only one maund. I want much more than that. I want a complete awakening of his whole mind."<sup>1</sup> Rouse their minds and their muscles would be active, he meant to say. Then alone will life again flutter where now reigns the stillness of the grave. If you must bear their burden on some occasions, do so ; but teach them, above all, to bear their own burden. Serve them by all means, but take care that as a result of your service, they learn to stand on their own legs. The test of your service would lie in the ability of those served to dispense with it. The best way of helping others is to help them to help themselves.

The dull and dreary life in villages, as we have seen, distressed Tagore most. In his writings and speeches and conversations he mentioned it again and again. When he was living at Silaidah, the absence of any real source of joy deeply moved him. At night from some hut half-lit by a flickering lamp would come tedious sounds accompanied by the shrill note of a brass instrument. It was like a long-drawn-out agony to him. Souls were hungry, but they had nothing to feed on but a travesty of music. This, in his eyes, seemed to symbolise the whole village life. Nothing could more effectively underline its dullness. Since then it was his constant endeavour to give them joy through his songs and music.

1. From an address delivered at the Sriniketan anniversary in February 1940.



For Tagore joy was both an end in itself and a means to an end. We live for the sake of joy. At the same time each of us can give our best only when there is joy within. Man unfolds himself more fully and spontaneously in an atmosphere of joy and happiness. So he was eager to introduce music into our life, which is an eternal source of joy. Aristotle, too, recognised the utility of music and stressed its value in the education of young minds. It was, according to him, a most fruitful occupation for leisure time. Tagore's emphasis is still greater. He considers it invaluable as a means of education. Let there be music in the soul and the mind will grow and expand. In all social and religious functions at Viswabharati music occupies a prominent place. It is an inseparable part of his scheme of education.

Equally, it is an inseparable part of his scheme of rural reconstruction. A well-known song<sup>1</sup> which is sung at the functions of Sriniketan, runs as follows:

“The sun shines, the rain pours down in showers,  
the leaves glisten in the bamboo grove,  
the smell of the newly tilled earth fills the air,  
Our hands are strong, our hearts glad,  
as we toil from morning till night to plough the land.”

These lines not only show Tagore's sympathy for the peasant, but his desire to lend dignity to his work and to lighten his burden by introducing joy and music into it.

Lack of joy in rural life moved him more deeply than its material poverty.<sup>2</sup> As long as the soul was starved, there

1. Composed in 1911, translated by the Poet himself, included in “Poems” (1942), p. 54.

2. “According to us, the poverty problem is not the most important, the problem of unhappiness is the great problem.” “City and Village”, p. 24.



could be no awakening of the spirit. Feed it with music, the rhythm of life will reappear and there will be an end of stagnation and misery. Here was a poet's remedy par excellence. The high priest of Indian renaissance was distressed at the sight of slumbering souls when the light of day had filled the beautiful world. He felt an irresistible urge to rouse them all, and, being a poet and musician, relied on the soft melody which flowed like a golden stream from his heart. It was his hope to reach the innermost recesses of their souls through the wealth of his varied tunes and sing them back to life.

Was there not an over-emphasis? one might enquire. Was the starvation of the soul the cause or the effect of an all-pervading material poverty? If economic prosperity were to return to the villages, would it not bring in its wake joy and happiness? Was it not more pressing to give food to the starving body than music to the starving mind? For, in a healthy body the mind would be less inert. These questions, I confess, often crossed my mind as I saw before my eyes the frail figures and the pale faces of the malaria-stricken people of Birbhum. From which end should we begin the work of reconstruction, the spiritual or the material, by giving them songs and music and dance or by providing them with tangible food? It is, however, possible to be hasty in our judgment.

Firstly, in Tagore's scheme of rural reconstruction the material aspect was by no means left out of account. As we have already seen and shall see later, it received explicit emphasis in many places and on many occasions. Secondly, there can be no doubt whatsoever, that the awakening of the mind, both in the short and in the long run, is far more important than any improvement in the standard of living brought about by isolated efforts from above. Unless people



learn to exert themselves and look after their own welfare, such efforts will be mostly in vain. And, lastly, the object of increasing wealth is to live a happier life. That does not mean that life becomes happier when wealth is greater. The assumption that happiness flows into the heart when money flows into the pocket, is belied by experience. True happiness, Tagore has stressed all through his life, depends more on the habit of the mind than on the size of the purse.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, India is a poor country. Even if the majority of the rural population were to cross the poverty zone, their average income in most cases would still remain small. It is therefore of vital importance for us to acquire the ability of creating joy even when the income is modest. Tagore was anxious to guarantee that the pursuit of wealth would not become an end in itself, and trample upon true happiness in its course. He was eager to ensure that, because our means are small, our homes should not remain cheerless.

It is no easy task that Tagore has set before us: to educate those who are innocent of the alphabet, to infuse a spirit of self-respect into those who traditionally look down upon themselves, to instil self-reliance into those who consider it almost a right to depend on others, to impel them to self-exertion when they are habitually indolent and to induce them to join hands with one another when they spend most of their time in mutual wrangling. The so-called village problem is thus a problem not of the village, but of its man. The task of rural reconstruction is to rebuild him.

1. "It is the fulness of life which makes one happy, not fulness of purse." "City and Village", p. 25.



## 3

Such a programme depends for its realisation on a band of devoted workers imbued with the right ideas. It is bound to make large calls on their patience and perseverance. Above all, it presupposes rare qualities of head and heart. Expert knowledge has to be married with idealism. That is the condition of success. But how rare is that combination! Here is the main rock on which the co-operative movement in India has foundered. Here is a common denominator to which most of our woes, in higher planes of life as much as in villages, can ultimately be reduced.

It is not enough to be a well-wisher, we must know what is good for those whom we wish well. It is not enough to try to serve others, we must acquire the ability to serve. Tagore has repeatedly stressed this point. Those who aspire to be servants of the society, must in full consciousness of their mission, qualify themselves for the task. The first essential requisite is to acquire the necessary knowledge and the second is to cultivate the true feelings. One is a training of the head, the other of the heart.

Tagore on several occasions recalled his experience during the days when the non-co-operation movement was at its height. 'Serve the villages', the Congress had given its mandate, and young men, mostly college students or new graduates, thronged the villages. The wave of enthusiasm was short-lived. It swept across large parts of the country like a flood and in most cases left behind a deposit of distrust and irritation. "The four-anna Babus" was the taunting label the villagers had invented for this conceited band of immature workers whose only qualification for rural work consisted of their membership of the Congress acquired on payment of a fee of four annas.

Tagore deprecated sentimental or quack remedies. Rural



problems must be tackled in a scientific spirit. Like other economic and social problems, they too call for expert handling. That is why he always stressed the necessity of collecting all relevant information on every specific issue before suggestions were offered for its solution. Even in "Bachelors' Club" which is a comic play, we find its chairman inducing some of its members to undertake the work of collecting data on various aspects of our life.<sup>1</sup> In an address delivered before students in 1905,<sup>2</sup> he appealed to them to assist the Bengal Literary Society in gathering information on our poems, songs, folk lores, on the ruins of temples, old manuscripts, village festivities, religious scriptures, about the cultivator's life, etc. so that we might in this way discover our country. In the Pabna address he urged that the first task of the proposed rural branches of the Provincial Conference would be the collection of all kinds of information in every part of the country. For "knowledge is a necessary prelude to action", and we must know fully the conditions prevailing in our fields of work.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in his "Call of Truth", he insisted that full information on all relevant points should be collected first in order to decide which economic programme would best meet the needs of the rural population.<sup>4</sup> During his visit to Russia he took a keen interest in the organisation for "regional study" which, he thought, could be profitably introduced in this country.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, I vividly recall the kindly interest he showed in the humble effort made by me to investigate the economic problems of Sriniketan villages, and, even when health was

1. "Chirakumar Sabha" (1340 B.S. edition), p. 73.

2. An Address to the Student Community, *Siksha*, pp. 32-33.

3. *Samuha*, p. 97.

4. See *Kalantar* (1344 B.S.), p. 173.

5. *Russiar Chithi*, p. 77.



progressively failing him, he did not fail to enquire about the progress of this work and to stress the utility of research work of this type.

“Give with respect”, was Tagore’s second injunction. This has a twofold implication for the rural worker. There may be a lack of respect in what we give and how we give. To treat villagers in a spirit of condescension and provide for them mere crumbs of culture and education—both are wrong and harmful. Tagore, as we have seen, insists on an equality of rights.

It is an essential task of the rural worker to teach the villager not to look down upon himself and to evoke self-confidence in him. This would be possible only if you respect him. The respect you show to him will breed self-respect in him and in turn he will learn to respect you. Equally only when you have sympathy for him, you can really mix with him, speak his language, feel the beats of his pulse and of his heart, and ultimately win his sympathy. If you can win his respect and sympathy, more than half the battle is won. For the door of his heart will open wide and your ideas will find an easy entrance.

The villager may now live a miserable life. But his present condition is not his own creation. It is wrong to blame him for it. The divine spark now burns but dimly in him, like a fire that has been neglected far too long. A thick layer of ashes lies heavily on it and its glow may not be visible from outside. But the spark is not extinguished, it can never be. Probe gently below the surface and you will still feel its warmth. Your task is to part the ashes with tender care and softly kindle the fire till all is aglow once again. But if you are inclined to treat it as a mere heap of ashes, then, for Heaven’s sake, you had better keep off from this sacred task.



## CHAPTER IX

### MAN ABOVE EVERYTHING

#### I

The main thoughts of Tagore on rural reconstruction have been set forth in the preceding chapters. Two facts clearly emerge from our analysis. Firstly, ever since the nineties up to the very end of his life, he remained an ardent advocate of rural uplift work. This was far more important in his eyes than "pure politics". It lay nearer to his heart than any other social question. Secondly, his ideas on rural reconstruction reveal, over a period of some fifty years, a remarkable consistency. Both his approach to the problem and the ideals he held in view showed surprisingly small changes during this half-century. As regards the method for realising these ideals, the careful observer will, however, notice certain subtle changes which give us a clue to the evolution of his social philosophy. In this chapter we may briefly note these changes and their implications.

"Swadeshi Samaj", as we have seen, was the first important landmark in the evolution of his thoughts on social questions. Here he appeared in the main as an advocate of the rehabilitation of the village society. The dynamic element was by no means absent from his analysis. Circumstances had changed and the exigencies of modern times called for certain reforms. He fully realised that a complete restoration was not possible. Nevertheless, he believed that the old foundation of the village society could remain more or less intact. There was no need to surrender its basic principles.



The old system was crumbling to pieces only because its leaders were migrating to towns and shirking on a large scale their traditional responsibilities. The heart was deserting the village—that was the heart of the problem. He therefore appealed to their sense of duty, pleaded that they should again look village-ward. He believed that the well-to-do could and should be persuaded to shoulder, as of yore, their responsibilities. Restore the old system and the traditional values with whatever modifications might be necessary to meet the requirements of a new age—that was the position he took up in “Swadeshi Samaj”.

In the years that followed a feeling of disappointment gradually crept upon him. Repeated appeals could not move his countrymen. He had failed to rouse the educated to their sense of duty. The well-to-do sections moved to the towns in search of a more comfortable life and cared little about the growing misery that lay behind. They obviously regarded the woeful plight of the deserted village as none of their concern. This callous disregard came as something like an eye-opener. His mind now looked deeper into the causes of the helplessness of the rural people. And inevitably he began to question the wisdom of an arrangement under which the welfare of so many was made to depend on the good will of so few. All our old values, he now realised, were not pure gold. The traditional system with its principle of services and obligations had no doubt worked out an equilibrium of its own. But its foundation could not be firmly laid because it was not sufficiently broadbased. For its continuation it depended too much on the few at the top and too little on the people in general. It exacted services from a handful of leading persons, but it bred in the lower ranks the habit of depending on others. As soon as those few turned their back to the village, the pillars of rural



society were gone and it began to crumble in ruins. There were no living forces at work among those who were left behind. In consequence, no new leaders were forthcoming who could worthily fill up the gaps at the top. The old system thus carried within it the seeds of a later tragedy.

In "Swadeshi Samaj" Tagore was eloquent on the structural beauty of our social organisation and spoke with pride of the skill of those who had built it through ages. But now he came to tone down the praise and recognised the element of weakness inherent in it. In "Gora" which came only six years later, there was, as we have seen, a significant change in his attitude. In an address on rural uplift delivered in 1915,<sup>1</sup> he criticised the old system under which society was divided into two groups—one to give and the other to take, one to serve and the other to be served. The urge to service was kept alive by the promise of reward in the other world for meritorious deeds rendered in this life. Such a system suffered from two clear disadvantages. As soon as this otherworldliness was on the wane and the rich migrated to the towns in search of pleasures to be enjoyed here and now, few were left in villages to cater to the essential needs of the village people. The sanction of religion became ineffective in an age in which religion itself increasingly lost its hold on the educated. On the other hand, the old system not only made the masses helpless, but also made them feel proud of their helplessness. They were conscious of their right to be served and often made a parade of their misery. Those who served them were supposed to be assured of their full reward after death. The poor thus came to feel that, far from their being a burden on others, the rich ought to be grateful to them. For, their misery was

1. *Palleer Unnati, Prabashi, Baishakh, 1322 B.S.*



an opportunity to the rich who could, through benevolent deeds, ensure a comfortable life on the other side of the grave. Thus in its anxiety to protect the weak the old system had perpetuated weakness ; in helping the poor it had only helped poverty.

In his "Call of Truth" written in 1921, Tagore, referring to his essay on "Swadeshi Samaj", said that "whatever may have been the faults of that analysis" he wanted to tell his countrymen at that time that "we have to win our country from our own inertia and our own indifference."<sup>1</sup> Thus he admitted, by implication, that there was some fault in the earlier analysis. In his address to the Sriniketan workers<sup>2</sup> he pointed out the fault in clear terms and admitted that the old organisation was not calculated to kindle the spirit of self-reliance among the people.

2

In "Swadeshi Samaj" Tagore drew a sharp line of demarcation between State and Society. He looked at the State with an eye of suspicion and was inclined to regard an extension of its functions in itself as an evil. This attitude may, *prima facie*, appear to be analogous to that of the non-interventionist school in England in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. There is, however, a fundamental difference behind this apparent similarity. In a country under foreign rule there are far stronger arguments to support this point of view than the *laissez-faire* school could ever bring forward in England. A foreign government has little incentive to intervene for the welfare of the people.

1. *Satyer Ahwan, Kalantar*, p. 157.

2. See *ante* p. 64.



Its attitude is usually one of indifference. When it does intervene its *bona fides* are bound to be suspect and not always without reason. And lastly, even when inspired by good intention, a foreign government may not infrequently fail to understand the real problem of the country it rules.

These practical considerations were no doubt enough justification for his refusal to look up to the State for help and for his plea to revive our own social organisation. Yet the main reason for his insistence appears to have been somewhat different. "Swadeshi Samaj" was written during what was undoubtedly a phase of philosophic conservatism in Tagore's life. At that time he undoubtedly revealed a softness for the existing institutions. Like an Aristotle he judged them in terms of their inner meaning and measured their worth with reference to the purpose, to serve which they had been called into being. He was inclined to give his verdict on an institution only after taking it at its best. Thus while others were running down our social institutions because of their shortcomings, he was often inclined to justify them in terms of their potentialities for good. "Swadeshi Samaj" was a typical product of a period in which Tagore showed a predisposition to idealise the prevailing order.

Here, again, a shift in emphasis took place in course of time. Broadly speaking, two factors influenced his later attitude to State. His faith in the principle of trusteeship grew weaker if only because trustees of the right type were not forthcoming. Society thus failed to help itself out of its difficulties. This alone was enough to soften his earlier scruples about State help. The cause naturally came first in his consideration. If the State were to be the only agent to further, however half-heartedly and stintingly, the cause that was so dear to him, he could no longer be opposed to



its intervention in social life merely on theoretical grounds. As he came more and more into contact with different systems of government in various countries, his conception of the functions of a modern State gradually widened. In the past our Society had played a far more important part than our State in the organisation of collective life. In the circumstances then prevailing, this was perhaps quite as well, if not inevitable. But there was no special virtue inherent in the system which had thus grown up in this country. Moreover, conditions since then had changed radically. Modern science and technique had rendered possible the organisation of far bigger territorial units. Out of the dynamic forces of modern times there grew a tendency towards a strong centralised State with very much wider functions in its hands. The same forces were in operation in India as well. The sharp contrast between State and Society, on which he had laid so much stress in "Swadeshi Samaj", must have softened down in his mind in the light of his subsequent experience.

The climax came with his visit to Russia. Here he saw with his own eyes what a modern State could do provided it was a people's State and therefore unflinchingly looked after the welfare of the community. A new conception of State now forced itself upon his attention. He now realised that an ideal society could be organised only if the forces of the State were relentlessly mobilised for the purpose. It was no longer a question of State *versus* Society. Modern Society could hardly flourish without the backing of a powerful State.

Tagore had long dreamed of a community where every individual would receive education and be invested with human dignity. He had, however, realised the magnitude of the task in a vast country like India where the masses had



lived for generations in complete ignorance.<sup>1</sup> Realities, he feared, were mightier than his craving. His dream remained only a cry of the heart. Practical considerations called for a compromise in his ideal. Mass literacy was all that he wanted. He dared not ask for more.

The visit to Russia—a “pilgrimage” he called it—opened up new vistas of possibilities before his eyes. That so much could be achieved for so many within so little time in a country which until recently was as backward as India, came to him almost as a revelation. He was filled with new hopes. The vision which he had set aside merely on grounds of practical difficulties, once again floated before him in all its grandeur. These difficulties, he was now convinced, were not inherent in the conditions, but were due to institutional shortcomings. The ideal, it was now proved, was also a practical ideal. He therefore shed all inner reservations and espoused that ideal with all his heart.

But the mountain of apathy and indifference, both official and non-official, still blocked the path of progress. He yearned for a State organisation in this country, which would work for the welfare of the people with something of the push and drive, zeal and earnestness he had seen in Russia. But our authorities were no more prepared to work for the cause than our Zemindars and other social leaders had been. His faith in social stewardship had foundered on the failings of the stewards themselves. The new hopes roused within him about the possibilities of State enterprise were, from the outset, destined to founder on the apathy of our rulers. And just as he had started to attack, with growing vehemence, a social organisation under which the

1. See a letter written from Silaidaha on May 10, 1893, included in *Chhinna-patra*, p. 200. Compare it with the first letter in *Russian Chithi*, particularly pp. 1-2.



welfare of the vast majority came to depend on the whims of a few, so also he now became increasingly critical of a system of government which self-complacently tried to cover up its accumulated sins of omission with a thin cloak of words.

If he was baffled in his hope to see reforms initiated from above, he had long ago been convinced of the utter impossibility of bringing about a regeneration from below. Those who had for centuries been nursed as dependants, could not be taught self-help overnight. Tagore therefore pinned his hopes on a gradual change in the outlook, both of the leaders and the masses. This was bound to be a slow process, but there was, he felt, no other alternative. Such a change might come from outside, as a result of world forces which could no longer leave this country untouched. At the same time he was anxious to contribute whatever he could to hasten that change. The initiative for rural regeneration must come from the top. There was, he knew, no escape from that conclusion. A band of devoted workers was indispensable for the purpose. But it was not a reversion to the trustee system that he wanted. He was anxious to avoid the mistake of the past. He was therefore careful to insist that the greatest task before rural workers was to rouse the latent powers of the masses so that a force might begin to work among them from within. Thus the use of leading-strings, though inevitable, was to be as temporary as possible. It would, as it were, be a trusteeship, the first task of which was to end it.

The changes which became noticeable in his social ideas did not make any substantial difference so far as the immediate task was concerned. After his visit to Russia he ceased to be a non-interventionist, or rather, if he continued to be one, it was not on philosophic, but on empirical, grounds. He might no longer object to State intervention for



the promotion of general welfare, but such intervention was, after all, not forthcoming. In other words, he had lost just one theoretical plank from the platform, from which he had preached his gospel of self-help. His general position was hardly affected thereby. The visit to Russia had convinced him that his social ideal was realisable through human efforts. But the immediate prospects of its realisation did not in the least brighten. In his writings and utterances he now demanded more for the people than he had done before. He insisted, among other things, on an equality of rights between villagers and town-dwellers as regards education. The margin between "what is" and "what could be" became wider in his eyes, and for that very reason the pang of disappointment was all the keener. He fondly clung to his own experiment in rural reconstruction, drawing whatever consolation he could from the thought that though the enterprise was small, the cause it stood for was great.

## 3

Closely corresponding to the evolution of his social philosophy, there were well-marked phases in the evolution of his religious thoughts. Here, too, he had long relied on the principle of trusteeship. In religious as much as in social questions, the reform he had visualised was in the main a restoration of the order of things which had once prevailed in the country. Our institutions had deteriorated through neglect and the impact of outside forces. How to reconstruct them was, in his view, the crux of the problem. If, at the time of "Swadeshi Samaj", he still had faith in the old social system, in an article entitled "Brahman" and written only two years previously, he clearly demonstrated his faith in the old religious order. While, on the one hand, he appealed to the Zemindars and other well-to-do people



to be true to their tradition and bear their social responsibilities, he exhorted, on the other hand, the upper castes to be faithful to their religious mission and through purity of conduct and the pursuit of lofty ideals, once again to serve as the spiritual leaders of the country.

The principle of stewardship did not, however, prove to be any more effective in the spiritual sphere than in the social. The Brahmans would not conform to his injunctions any more than the Zemindars. In consequence, Tagore began to attack a system which had entrusted the spiritual development of the people to a small section at the top. For a time such arrangement might have worked all right. But as soon as the Brahmans ceased to be animated by a true religious spirit, the masses were left with nothing but a mass of rigid customs and dubious, often pernicious, practices which passed in the name of religion.

Moreover, Hinduism had deliberately lowered the standard of religion as a concession to the supposedly low level of intelligence of the general people. It gave its sanction to idolatry and a host of superstitious practices. Indeed it carried compromise so far that ultimately its own position was compromised. It practised tolerance on such a scale as to surrender much of the essential spirit of religion. Man rises in stature only in response to the calls made on his abilities. If such calls are purposely kept at a minimum from the outset, he is deprived of the greatest incentive to growth. In their anxiety to cut religion according to the intelligence of the people our Brahmanical leaders had ended by producing a strait waistcoat which left little room for the growth of the mind. In this way Hinduism, in spite of all its noble intentions, only made spiritual dwarfs of the masses.

Once religion lost its efficacy as a spiritual lever, it was no easy task to regain it. The medium of moral elevation



was itself vitiated. It had to be purified first, before it could ever purify others. But the pull of customs and superstitions proved far stronger than that of the reformer. Attempt at reforming religion foundered on the very rock which it had itself created. Instead of religion lifting man to a higher level, he constantly brought it down to his own.

With the realisation of these weaknesses Tagore's criticism of orthodox religion became stronger. In the years that followed he shed many of the beliefs for which he had himself at one time offered philosophic justification. The publication of "Gora" revealed how far he had travelled from the position held in "Brahman" only eight years previously. As has been mentioned in a previous chapter, Gora had for years upheld many of the prevalent customs and religious practices. Because of his subjective approach, he had idealised their meaning and overlooked their social repercussions. Contact with realities, however, soon began to wear down his faith. The climax was reached when his racial origin was disclosed to him. He could no longer escape from the conclusion that what he had so long felt to be inborn, to be in his blood, was, in fact, only acquired, the outcome of the environment in which he had been brought up. Conventions had so long masqueraded as his inner convictions. At one stroke the bottom was knocked off from his philosophic conservatism. The ties of faiths and beliefs which had bound him to the environment and the people around him, now melted away like mists before the rising sun. In their place there remained but one bond, so incredibly simple and yet intrinsically so much stronger than all the rest combined, the bond of humanity. He ceased to belong to the society in which he had been brought up and was reborn, as it were, in the greater society of man.



Thus through Gora Tagore proclaimed common humanity as the greatest truth in life and boldly placed man before religion or race. Here was a clear forerunner of the thesis which he was to propound, twenty-one years later, in his "Religion of Man". The essence of religion, as he there put forth with great force, lay in the cultivation of true relationship between man and man, in realising in its full implications the fact that all human beings are but parts of a Great Humanity. In many of the sermons delivered at Santiniketan during the last few years of his life, the greatest emphasis was laid on this point.

Tagore had at one time hoped that religion, if reformed and purified, would establish the ideal relationship between man and man. That hope failed. He now reversed his position and insisted that only if man's relation to man were placed on a proper basis could we arrive at true religion. In short, not through religion to better human relations, but through better human relations to a better religion—that was the position he now took up. •

Compared with his earlier attitude, this thesis might appear as a revolution. Yet as he himself told us, the religion of man was but a philosophic justification of what he had intuitively perceived fifty years previously and had recorded in his "Awakening of the Fountain".

## 4

Thus there is a striking parallelism between the evolution of Tagore's social philosophy and that of his religious thoughts. In each case four more or less well-marked stages can be distinguished: Intuitive perception, as reflected in the "Awakening of the Fountain" (1882) and the "Bharati" articles on social problems written in the early eighties; philosophic conservatism, which found its best



expression in "Swadeshi Samaj" (1904) and "Brahman" (1902) on the social and the religious side respectively; revaluation and revolution, as represented in "Gora"; and lastly, what may be called the phase of philosophic liberalism, which found its classic expression in "Letters from Russia" (1932) on the one hand, and in "Religion of Man" (1931) on the other.

Throughout this whole period, however, the main objective before him remained unchanged. The problem with which his mind remained consciously or unconsciously preoccupied all through his life was how to bring man to full development and place man's relationship to man on a harmonious basis. The greatest truth about man, he repeatedly urged, is his humanity. "Man above everything"—that was his life's motto and the essence of all his teachings. Religion was therefore for man and not the other way round. The same was true of the social order. When he discovered that traditional religion and the old social order hampered the growth of man instead of assisting it, he had the courage to reject both.

Thus Tagore was essentially a liberal as regards the ends he pursued, though at one time he was a conservative as regards the means he relied on for their realisation. An unflinching faith in the ultimate goal was the greatest dynamic force in his life which in the end revolutionised the methods. When experience revealed the inadequacy of the old order and the need for a drastic readjustment in methods, he boldly broke away both from tradition and his earlier beliefs and became a full-fledged liberal. The revolutionary in him, now shorn of his conservative guise, stood revealed in all his grandeur, uncompromising both in ends and means and fearlessly demanding the fullest measure of freedom and progress for all.







## EXPERIMENTS IN RURAL RECONSTRUCTION







## CHAPTER X

### EXPERIMENTS AT SILAIDAH AND PATISAR

#### I

“My thoughts on motherland which permeated my mind ever since my boyhood days”, says Tagore, “have not been expressed merely in the rhythm of metres. I always tried to translate them into practice. And for this I staked everything. Not that I owned much, but whatever I possessed was devoted to this cause.”<sup>1</sup>

Tagore's love of country did not exhaust itself in words. True love, as he always emphasised, seeks its manifestation through service, and country becomes a reality only through the attempt to serve her. As was said in the introduction, he did not merely soar in the realm of ideas, though as a poet he was perfectly entitled to do so. To him thoughts were only a prelude to action.

In one of his letters from Russia he tells us how he first came to undertake the work of rural reconstruction. “At the end of the Pabna conference”, he says, “I told some influential political leader that if we were really earnest about our political progress, then we must, first of all, develop the manhood of those who now live in the lowest layers of the society. He laughed away this idea so easily that I could not help feeling that our leaders had their conception of the country borrowed from some foreign school.

1. *Sanibarar Chithi*, Baisakh, 1347 B.S.



At heart they did not feel for the people. The advantage of such a mentality is that you can indulge in excitement and yet continue to shirk responsibility. But the moment you admit that the people of the country are your own, it becomes incumbent on you to accept responsibility and to get on to solid work on their behalf without further loss of time.”<sup>1</sup>

Since then, Tagore goes on to tell us, he often heard the echo of what he had said at Pabna. Money too was collected now and then for rural welfare work, though it mostly evaporated in the vociferous upper layer of the society and hardly anything ever percolated as far down as the village.

“Once I lived in a boat on the Padma”, he goes on a little later, “and devoted myself to literature. I then used to fancy that my only vocation was to delve with the pen deep in the mine of ideas, that I was not competent for any other work. But I failed to persuade anybody that the real field of home rule was in the village and that the cultivation of that field must start at once. And so for a while I set aside my pen and decided that I should myself undertake the work.”<sup>2</sup>

Here we have, in his own words, the psychological background for his first attempt to give effect to the ideal which he had set up in “Swadeshi Samaj” and which he had just held before his fellow-zemindars in the Pabna address.

2

Silaidaha in the district of Nadia was selected as the centre for his first experiment. A sort of nucleus for rural

1. *Russiar Chithi*, pp. 26-28.

2. *Ibid.*



work was already available there. An agricultural bank had been founded<sup>1</sup> to advance loans, particularly seasonal, to the cultivators on reasonable rates of interest. A primary school for village boys had been in existence. Lastly, it had for years been a special feature of the Tagore estate to settle disputes as far as possible by arbitration.

With the help of a group of young workers<sup>2</sup> Tagore made an attempt to extend the scope of this work and to tackle rural problems in a more systematic fashion. The workers lived in different villages in intimate contact with the people, trying to organise them so that they might themselves jointly tackle their problems. Workers and villagers co-operated in carrying out such works as repairing roads and drains, excavating tanks, clearing jungles. Steps were taken also in other directions, which may be briefly noted here.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of centralising the administration of the estate in the office, as is still the usual practice in estate management, a number of separate centres with "divisional offices" were started. This arrangement which in certain respects was reminiscent of the old panchayat system, rendered possible a more intimate relationship between the tenants and the managing staff so that the interests of the former could be better safeguarded. Decentralised management, however, involved a substantial rise in expenditure so that the system was later suspended at Silaidaha, though it is still in vogue in Kaligram area.

1. In 1300 B.S. (1893-4 A.D.).

2. In 1908. Prominent among the workers was Kalimohan Ghosh who later joined the Sriniketan Institute when it was founded in 1922 and served there until his death in 1940. See also Appendix I, Letter No. 3.

3. For a brief account of the work done at Silaidaha see "*Silaidah Rabindranather Karmajiban*" by Sachindranath Adhikari, *Sonar Bangla, Bhadra*, 1348 B.S.



A weaving school was established at Kusthea. Great efforts were made to stimulate this cottage industry. Besides, in order to improve the economic conditions of the tenants and thereby also the income of the estate, several new businesses (*e.g.* jute and cloth trade, brick kilns, sugar crushing mill) were introduced at Kusthea.<sup>1</sup> Attempts were also made to introduce new commercial crops (*e.g.* potato) and to give practical demonstration in the use of manures. To that effect experiments were made on an area of some 80 bighas.

Special attention was paid to the spread of education. Three schools were established in addition to a girls' school. Besides, two or three *tols* for the study of Sanskrit and many *pathsalas* or lower primary schools within the area were practically run with grants from the estate. Stress was also laid on physical culture and gymnasiums were opened for the purpose. Mention may also be made of the hospital at Kusthea.

In 1919 the Tagore estate was divided up and the Silaidaha section was allotted to other members of the family. Accordingly, the poet ceased to be the Zemindar of that area.<sup>2</sup> The centre of his rural work was shifted to Kaligram which represented his share of the estate.

### 3

A Welfare Fund<sup>3</sup> had already been established at Patisar in Kaligram Pargana as early as 1312 B.S. (1905)

1. See Appendix I, Letter No. 4.

2. In 1330 B.S., five years after the division of the Zemindari, Tagore visited Silaidaha with the late C. F. Andrews. Incidentally, some of the *pathsalas* started at that centre are still in existence.

3. For a short history of this Fund and the Welfare Society of Kaligram, see Appendix II.



with the immediate object of running a high school and a charitable dispensary. Within two or three years the scope of its activities was extended. In 1912 Tagore, during a visit to Patisar, made some suggestions about the reorganisation of the activities financed from this Fund, which were duly carried out. In 1915 he initiated another full-scale experiment in rural reconstruction in this centre with the help of another group of workers. The poet himself drew up a programme which closely followed the lines of the scheme he had submitted to the Bengal Social Service League.<sup>1</sup> It included the following items: facilities for medical treatment ; provision for primary education ; public works, that is, digging wells, making and repairing roads, clearing jungles, etc. ; protection of the cultivating classes from the ruinous effects of indebtedness ; and settlement of all quarrels by arbitration.

Thanks to the Welfare Society a solid beginning had already been made in carrying out parts of this programme. Three centres had already been started at Patisar, Kamta and Ratowal respectively, each with a hospital and a dispensary. The distribution of medicine was free. Provision was duly made for a doctor and also for a few beds in the hospitals. Tagore showed some ingenuity in the collection of funds to meet the expenses for this charitable work. According to the arrangements made by the Welfare Society the tenants contributed to the Fund at the rate of one anna for every rupee of the rent paid while the Zemindar, that is, Tagore himself, contributed another anna. In addition another source of income soon began to be tapped. In many parts of Bengal it was, as it still is, the custom that anybody guilty of some

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 39-40.



violation of social rules or tradition should pay a penalty which often took the form of an expensive feast. Tagore arranged that a guilty person could from now on, get off by paying a moderate sum to the Welfare Fund and would no longer be required to incur the heavy expenses of a social feast. Money collected in the Fund was, of course, utilised for public services. Thus the amended system of social punishment lessened the strain on individuals while it brought funds which could be spent for general welfare.

As regards education, the total number of *pathsalas* established now exceeded two hundred. These included both day and night schools while provision was made for all including children and old men. To remove illiteracy and to make the students familiar with the alphabet was recognised to be the first task. Then came the three R's. Once sufficient progress had been made in reading, writing and arithmetic, it was considered the right time to begin lessons in history, geography, etc. In teaching these subjects the main emphasis was laid on India though, incidentally, history and geography of the world were covered. The education programme included oral lessons on first aid, on the improvement of agriculture, on fire-fighting, social duties in times of floods, etc. During leisure time world news were read and discussed. Thus here again we find what Tagore urged on so many occasions, namely, that in a rational system of education the motto should be: from the concrete to the abstract and from one's own country to the world, and not the other way round. Like charity, education must in the first instance be related to one's homeland. Tagore has always been an advocate of the principle of "learning by doing" and insisted that "education should be expressive of indigenous culture".



Public works naturally called for larger finances. Excavating tanks, sinking wells, making and repairing roads, clearing jungles—all were expensive items while the resources of the cultivators were necessarily limited. To meet this financial difficulty a special scheme was adopted, under which the tenants could make their contributions in the form of labour. In other words, their subscriptions were fixed in terms of man-hour work. The relatively well-to-do people, if unwilling or unable to supply their own physical labour, were each required to subscribe a sum equal to the wages of one worker. In this way public works worth thousands of rupees were executed in this area.<sup>1</sup>

As regards the mitigation of the crippling burden of debt, a good deal was achieved at Kaligram. The position of the average cultivator was essentially the same here as in most parts of Bengal or, for that matter, of India. His resources were slender. The crop raised was not enough to carry him through the year. More often than not he had to borrow from moneylenders at usurious rates of interest. The payment of interest alone took away a large slice of his income. As a result the deficit in his annual budget widened while the capital due to his creditor at best continued undiminished from year to year.

To remedy such a situation the following arrangement was made. Loans were now granted to the cultivators at 9 per cent directly from the Agricultural Bank of the estate. The amount of the loan allowed was strictly controlled and

1. The Anderson canal in Brahmanbaria, East Bengal, was constructed in a similar way, but the supply of voluntary labour was limited so that an element of force was far from absent. Kaligram seems to provide the first example in Bengal of public works mainly carried out with the voluntary contribution of individual labour.



made to correspond to the actual requirements of the borrower. The risks of reckless borrowing were thus kept at a minimum. The borrowed money was used for productive purposes. The rural workers themselves assessed the credit requirements of the cultivators instead of leaving this essential task to the salaried staff of the estate. The advances made were mostly utilised for crop-raising and the repayment of the loans was made a first charge on the final crop. Consequently, after harvest the crop did not go to the cultivator's house, but was brought straight from the fields to the office of the estate. The cultivator could take away his share only after paying off the debt together with the interest. It was a general practice to write off 3 per cent of the interest at the time of clearing debts so that the net interest charged amounted to 6 per cent. In case of heavy deficits in the cultivator's family budget, further relief was almost invariably granted. Thus freed from his current debts he would again be in a position to borrow from the estate whenever a necessity arose.

The advantages of such a scheme are clear. Firstly, credit was regulated along sound lines. The cultivator was prevented from light-heartedly adding to his burden of debt while he was assured that the funds necessary for his seasonal operations and other productive work would be available to him at the right moment. Secondly, the interest rate charged was kept within very reasonable limits. The 3 per cent concession granted at the time of debt repayment was, psychologically, a wise device. It served as an inducement to the borrower to clear off all outstandings. Thirdly, debt could not go on accumulating for an indefinite period while this procedure saved the borrowers from the baneful effects of compound interest which so often spell ruin to the cultivating class. Fourthly, the practice



of taking the crop from the field to the headquarters of the estate, was an effective guarantee that the advances made would be paid off in due course. It put a check on the temptation to default, to which even solvent borrowers in rural areas are prone to succumb.

For Indian conditions where the cultivator is poor, ignorant and often irresponsible, it is difficult to think of a better scheme of rural finance. Things have not changed much, certainly they have not changed for the better, since those days. Even to-day whatever may be the agency for catering agricultural credit, if it is to meet the real needs of the rural population, it must be based on the principles embodied in the above scheme. As a matter of fact, in all questions of rehabilitating the co-operative movement in this country, emphasis is now laid on regulated credit which essentially involves the same principles.<sup>1</sup>

Those who were actually in charge of the execution of this scheme, have themselves testified to its success. It worked so well that professional moneylenders, in particular those charging excessive rates of interest, practically lost all their business in the area where it was in operation. The reputation of the estate was so high that, once refused a loan from this source, a tenant found it very difficult to borrow elsewhere. For, the very fact that the estate could turn down his request for a loan, was enough to make his creditworthiness suspect to others. All in all, this scheme brought substantial relief to the indebted peasantry in Kaligram villages and the people were largely freed from their load of debt.

1. We may also note that at the Gosaba estate of the late Sir Daniel Hamilton credit facilities are extended to cultivators on somewhat similar lines.



Lastly, the plan to settle all local quarrels by arbitration without appeal to the court, met with an outstanding success. This principle had already been in vogue in the Tagore estate, but it received a new impetus now that it was made an integral part of a comprehensive rural uplift movement. Hindus and Mussalmans impartially welcomed the system. For it did not take them long to realise that in this way they could secure justice practically for nothing while they would invariably be involved in a good deal of wasteful expenditure if every case were to be referred to some law-court. As long as this scheme was in operation, and even for some years after its suspension, not a single case went to the court. This, it is said, is borne out by official records relating to this area for the years 1915-16.<sup>1</sup>

The work could not continue on this scale for long. The workers who were in charge of the scheme of rural reconstruction were called away for various reasons. With their disappearance the work devolved entirely on the Welfare Society which, however, has continued to function to this day and has substantially contributed to the well-being of the rural population in that area.<sup>2</sup>

A letter<sup>3</sup> written by Tagore to one of the workers at Kaligram reflects the keen interest he took in the enterprise. Once again it gives us in a nutshell his main thoughts on rural reconstruction which have been set forth in Part I: the greatest task before the rural workers is to teach

1. For an account of the work done in 1915 at Kaligram, see *Rabindra-Jibanir Nutan Upakaran, Sanibarar Chithi*, Asvin, 1348 B.S.

2. For the present position of this Society, see Appendix II. In Appendix III will be found an extract from the District Gazetteer, Rajshahi, relating to the rural welfare work at Kaligram.

3. Appendix I, Letter No. 7.



the villager to stand on his own legs, and collectively look after general welfare ; quality is more important than quantity so that, once a principle is established and its utility demonstrated in one spot, it irresistibly spreads over a wider area ; life in villages must be made more attractive, work and joy must be combined and an æsthetic sense should be developed. That Tagore was by no means oblivious of the material needs of the village is abundantly proved by his programme of work at Kaligram. As this letter shows, he had time enough to think of such humble village industries as the manufacture of straw-mats, earthen pots, wicker baskets, etc. Here as elsewhere the whole gamut of village life was included in his programme of rural reconstruction.



## CHAPTER XI

### SRINEKETAN

#### I

The site on which Sriniketan is now situated was acquired as far back as 1912.<sup>1</sup> At that time it was full of jungles and the building was in anything but good condition so that a considerable amount of spade work was needed before the place could be made habitable. Nor was it all. Malaria was so rampant that it was extremely hard for anybody to live there. After the jungles had been cleared and the essential repair works carried through, an attempt was made to establish a model farm for the benefit of the cultivators of the surrounding villages.<sup>2</sup> But stricken with malaria the early enthusiasts had to abandon the experiment. Subsequently, the dairy of Santiniketan was transferred there, but the dairy-workers suffered the same fate. Malaria was thus the first great obstacle which had to be overcome before any headway could be made in the actual work.

Almost ten years passed in this way. During that period there were moments when the School at Santiniketan faced great financial stringency. On several occasions Tagore

1. Tagore was in London when Major S. P. Sinha, the eldest brother of Lord Sinha, proposed to sell the Surul property, consisting of about 20 acres of land together with a building, which he purchased on his return to India for Rs. 10,000.

2. This work was undertaken by Mr. R. N. Tagore and Dr. N. N. Ganguly, the poet's son and son-in-law respectively.



was advised by friends to sell off the Surul property, but all through he refused to entertain such idea. At heart he still hoped that some day this place would become the seat of another experiment in rural reconstruction.

In 1920 when in New York, Tagore met a young Englishman, Mr. Leonard K. Elmhirst, who had been educated at Cambridge and was now studying agriculture at Cornell. Tagore talked to him about his long cherished project to start a centre of rural reconstruction work at Sriniketan, mentioning that he was only waiting for the right man and the required funds to turn up. The idea appealed to Mr. Elmhirst who had himself been feeling the same way. Eight months later he came to Santiniketan and offered to undertake the work. Luckily the financial difficulty too was solved at the same time. For Mr. Elmhirst brought with him the welcome news that a noble American lady, Mrs. Willard Straight (now Mrs. L. K. Elmhirst), who had made philanthropy her life's hobby and whose philanthropy was of that rare brand which ignores all geographical boundaries, had offered the necessary funds to start and carry on the work. With the problem of man and money solved in this unique way, it was now possible to translate the long deferred plan into action. A new chapter now began in the history of Sriniketan. Early in 1922, Mr. Elmhirst went over there with a batch of workers to lay the foundation of the Institute of Rural Reconstruction.<sup>1</sup>

It was no easy task that Mr. Elmhirst had undertaken. Many were the difficulties, personal and environmental,

1. Of these early workers mention may be made in particular of Kalimohan Ghose, Gour Gopal Ghose and Santosh Mazumdar, all of whom have since passed away.



which at once confronted him. But the magnitude of the task did not daunt him. (Nor could the cheerless atmosphere of rural Bengal, so foreign to a foreigner who had spent years in America, impair his enthusiasm or weaken his resolution to come to grips with the problems around him.)

His enthusiasm infected the batch of his young co-workers. In course of time a real *esprit de corps* grew up, which is the first essential condition of success in an enterprise of this nature. The villagers at first looked askance at this ubiquitous white man. But through tact and patience and that broad human understanding which is so peculiarly his own, he slowly and steadily wore down their opposition. By the time he left Sriniketan, he had succeeded in winning the confidence of the villagers to an extent not very common even among Indians who devote themselves to village work.

It would be little exaggeration to say that during the period which he spent at Sriniketan, he truly laid the foundation of the Institute. But for his efforts it could not have attained its present stature. On many occasions Tagore has acknowledged the services rendered by him.

On his return to England Mr. Elmhirst founded an institution at Dartington Hall (Totnes, Devonshire), which largely embodies the ideal of Tagore, more especially that of treating life as an organic whole and of combining work with joy. (Distance, however, has not weakened the bond which binds him to Sriniketan.) In the midst of his pre-occupations in other spheres, he still takes a keen interest in the problem of this institute and bears its financial burden.



From its very start Sriniketan has suffered from some severe handicaps. Birbhum is a decadent region, where decay has already gone much too far. The condition of villages is worse here than in most parts of Bengal. The peasantry is both poorer and more backward. If villages are a stronghold of conservatism, those of Birbhum are much more so. Malaria has joined hands with poverty in ravaging them. The incidence of both is particularly heavy in the Sriniketan villages, in some of which the population has been decimated in two or three generations. To save them from the onslaught of the forces of decay, which have been gathering momentum for such a long time, is certainly no easy task. Besides, scarcity of water has been a crippling limitation. It gives rise to problem which can hardly be tackled by private enterprise. Most projects for improvement of the economic conditions of these villages founder on this rock. There can be little doubt that if the same efforts had been bestowed on some other part of Bengal, they would have been attended with far more solid results. Lastly, Sriniketan villages, unlike Kaligram and Patisar, are not within Tagore's Zemindari so that he had no strong hold on them. In fact, there were and still are, several local Zemindars who are not exactly carved out to play the part of enlightened authoritarianism as visualised by Tagore in his Pabna address. In spite of these heavy odds undoubted progress has been made in many directions. Under the double spur of Tagore's ideas and Elmhirst's initiative Sriniketan has grown from its humble beginnings into a full-fledged institute. The work that was begun at Silaidaha and continued at Kaligram has found here its culmination.

It would take us much too far to give a detailed account



of the work that is being done at Sriniketan. Nor is it quite necessary for our present purpose.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to say that an attempt is made here to give effect to the central ideas of Tagore on rural reconstruction. The conception of the organic unity of life is reflected in the organisation of the Institute, the various branches of which together cover all the aspects of life.

The Education Department consists of two branches: the Siksha-Satra or the ideal school for village boys—where boys belonging to all castes receive education from about the age of eight ; and the Siksha-Charcha Bhavana, which is a training school for village teachers—though the curriculum prescribed by the Government Department of Education is followed here, the trainees receive regular instruction in music, agriculture, hygiene and sanitation, scouting, principles of rural reconstruction and other cognate subjects. Both village boys and teachers also receive practical training at least in one village craft.

The Agricultural Department consists of a Farm and a Dairy. In the farm experiments are made with new crops or new varieties of existing crops, which appear to be suitable for local conditions. It also makes arrangements for a practical demonstration of the results of experiments whenever they are considered sufficiently important. Through the Dairy an effort is being made to stimulate animal husbandry along scientific lines. As Birbhum is a single-crop district it is realised that the dairy industry may go a considerable way in improving the economic condi-

1. For information about the actual working of Sriniketan, reference may be made to the Annual Reports of Viswabharati, Sriniketan Rural Studies and several Viswabharati Bulletins. Dr. Lal's "Reconstruction and Education in Rural India" is also helpful.



tions of the people, though lack of water, fodder and also of good pastures present great obstacles.

The Silpa-Bhavana or Industries Department attempts to revive old cottage industries as well as to introduce new ones which may suit local conditions. A single paddy crop which, too, is at the mercy of the vagaries of monsoon, is at present practically the only source of income of the vast majority. It is therefore of vital importance that the income from agriculture should be supplemented with the help of rural industries.

To the Village Welfare Department is entrusted the task of development work in the villages. It initiates public works (road repairing, tank excavation, etc.), looks after the village schools, of which there are now twelve, maintains a circulating library for the benefit of the villagers, organises social and cultural life, runs a Brati-Balak or boys' scout organisation, and also introduces into the villages the results of experiments carried out in the Farm, the Dairy and the Silpa-Bhavana. Attached to this Department is a Health Section with a central dispensary at Sriniketan. A Maternity and Child Welfare Section was established in 1940. There is a number of Co-operative Health Societies which provide facilities for medical treatment at a moderate cost. Much stress is now laid on the preventive side of health work. It is the task of the Village Welfare Department to take necessary steps in this direction. The health co-operatives also follow the maxim: "Prevention is better than cure".

It should be clear from this brief description that the Village Welfare Department occupies a key position at the Institute. The major part of rural uplift work is in fact carried through this Department. Its activities are confined to some fifteen villages which constitute the so-called Inten-



sive Area of Sriniketan. Rural workers who live in intimate contact with the villagers and usually belong to the Intensive Area, carry out the instructions issued from the headquarters.

There is a Central Co-operative Bank situated at Sriniketan. Though this bank is necessarily run as a separate organisation in accordance with the provisions of the existing legislation on co-operation, it, nevertheless, acts in close collaboration with the Institute.

From the very beginning stress was laid on scientific research. At present there is a special section which investigates the various economic problems of the locality. The object of the research work is to explore whatever possibilities there may be to raise the income of the people.

If the principle of indivisibility of life and of co-operation between rural workers and villagers have found expression in the organisation of Sriniketan, its activities bear no less clearly the stamp of the other principle, that of combining work with joy. Picnics and excursions, games and music, theatrical performances and socio-religious festivals—all this constitutes one of its regular features.

Two important festivals are observed at Sriniketan proper: a fair together with an exhibition in Magh (early in February), on the occasion of the anniversary of the Institute, and *Halakarshan* or a ploughing festival which comes off during the rainy season. Besides, some old festivals have been revived in the villages while some new ones have been introduced into them: Nawa-Varsha or New Year's Day, Varsha-Mangal or Rainy Season Festival, Vriksha-Ropan or Tree-planting, Navanna or New-Rice Festival and Vasanta-Utsav or Spring Festival.

While joy for the sake of joy underlies some of them, in others the ceremony is introduced as a reinforcement of



utilitarian considerations. This is particularly true of the tree-planting ceremony, the main object of which was explained by Tagore as follows: 'The greed of man waxed as he received the gifts of Mother Earth. He won arable lands from forests, but later the predominance of agricultural lands drove forests more and more out of existence. He cut down trees to meet his endless needs and stripped the Earth of her clothing of shade. As a result the air became increasingly hotter while the fertility of the soil alarmingly diminished. That is why North India, deprived of its shelter of forests, now lies mercilessly exposed to the scorching rays of the sun. With all this in our mind, we initiated some time ago, a tree-planting ceremony which is at bottom a welcome effort of spendthrift children to replenish the plundered stores of Mother Earth.'<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is in brief the outline of the Sriniketan Institute as organised at present. There is yet another aspect of this experiment, to which reference may be made here. Sriniketan is no doubt a small institute, but the value of the ideal for which it stands is not to be measured by its size. In a unique way it has combined Indian philosophy, British enterprise and American finance. 'To-day we are dreaming of a new world, of a brighter day that will be born out of the womb of this dark night.' Shall our vision dim once again when the ordeal is over? Shall we impatiently set aside as a mere nightmare, the wisdom that is belatedly dawning on us and imperceptibly glib back into that mood of self-complacency which blindly upholds the status quo and inexorably leads to disaster? If the

1. From an address delivered at the 'Ploughing Ceremony' at Sriniketan in 1939. A summarised version, authorised by Tagore, was published in *Prabashi, Asvin* 1346 B.S., p. 748-49.



dream of a brighter day is not to remain a mere dream, new values will have to be created and, above all, man's humanity to man will have to be reinforced in every conceivable way. It is to the credit of this small Institute that, in an obscure corner of a remote Indian village, it has unobtrusively adhered to those principles, on a large-scale acceptance of which the future of mankind primarily depends.



## CHAPTER XII

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In a previous chapter<sup>1</sup> we have already seen how Tagore first came to undertake the work of rural reconstruction. "All this I tried to explain in my 'Swadeshi Samaj' ", he says in another place, "and when I found that nobody took me at all seriously, and when pedants discovered to their utter disgust discrepancies between my proposal and some doctrines of John Stuart Mill, then I took up, unaided, my village organisation work, which at the present moment is throbbing out its last heart throbs in a remote corner of Bengal." <sup>2</sup>

Thus in the work which he started first at Silaidaha and Patisar, and later at Sriniketan there was a silent protest against the indifference of his countrymen. During the Swadeshi movement he had himself sung in one of his famous national songs: "If nobody answers to thy call walk alone".<sup>3</sup> For years through essays and speeches, stories and novels, poems and songs, he had tried to induce his countrymen to undertake positive work. His exhortations, however, were all in vain. The call went unheeded. Single-handed he therefore started his own enterprise. In another poem written in the same year he said:

1. See p. 83 above.

2. "On Constructive Work—A Letter", *Modern Review*, December, 1921.

3. For an English rendering of the full text by Tagore himself, see "Poems" (1942) p. 35.



“They call you mad. Wait for to-morrow and keep silent”.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of indifference he silently started the work on a small scale and patiently waited for to-morrow.

How far have his ideals of rural reconstruction been so far realised, one might enquire. Tagore himself did not have any exaggerated opinion about his practical achievements in this field. Besides, he effectively forestalled all possible criticism when with disarming frankness he admitted: “Of course, turning out songs is my proper work. But those who are unfortunate, cannot afford to limit their choice to the works they can do ; they must also bear the burden of tasks they cannot do.”<sup>2</sup> He undertook this work not because he thought he could do it better than others, but because those who could do it better would not undertake it.

This in itself would be a sufficient reply to critics. There are, of course, other considerations as well. The difficulties which Sriniketan had to encounter have already been mentioned. In any case the value of his ideas does not depend on the results of his experiments. The task, he has himself pointed out, is a hard one. The creation of the model, as every artist knows, is the most difficult part of his work. It is no less so with the creation of a model for future India. If the achievement falls short of the ideal, it is largely a measure of the difficulties involved in the enterprise. “What is true to-day in the world of thought, will be true to-morrow in our life”, another Bengali poet has said. Ideas are the forerunners of action. Tagore has given us the wealth of his ideas ; their realisation, it may be hoped, will follow in the fulness of time.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

2. “On Constructive Work”, etc.



What are ten or fifteen villages in a vast country like India, one might think. Are they not as good as a drop in the ocean? Small things were, however, not small in Tagore's eyes. He judged them not by their size, but by their worth, their inner meaning. "The scale of our enterprise", he often stressed, "can never be a matter of pride to us but let us hope its truth will be". Ideas, if they have the vitality of truth in them, grow and spread in course of time. But in the initial stages they have to be cultivated. Seeds must first be implanted somewhere. Sriniketan, in Tagore's eyes, was a seed-bed of truth.

Thus the conventional rod of measuring success and failure has only a limited applicability here. In spite of heavy odds not a little progress has been made at Sriniketan. But, to our mind, the real value of the two practical efforts he made during his life-time lies in the fact that they bear a poignant witness to the depth of his feeling and reveal, more effectively than anything else ever could, how near he held the cause to his heart. His feeling for the country took, as it were, concrete shape at Sriniketan. Moreover, as was seen in the case of Jyotirindranath, ideas spread best through the effort to execute them so that attempts to realise them very often transcend in importance all immediate results. Judged in this sense, effort was bigger than achievement, and even failure to realise all his ideals of rural life in the immediate experiments could only lend an additional glory to his career.



## APPENDIX I

### EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS

1. From a letter addressed to the late Sir J. C. Bose, dated Silaidah 10th Ashāra 1306 B.S. (Published in *Prabashi*).

“At an inauspicious moment Mr. Akshoy Kumar Maitreya<sup>1</sup> left twenty silk-worms in my house. And now I am greatly perturbed over the problem of feeding and accommodating two lakhs of hungry insects. Some ten to twelve persons are busy night and day cleaning their trays and collecting leaves from the neighbouring villages. Lawrence has given up his baths and meals and sleep for serving them. He drags me about almost ten times a day. He has made me almost crazy. . . .

“Our agricultural work is getting on fairly well. We had managed to procure seeds of American maize. The plants are growing rapidly. We have sown a fine variety of Madras paddy and so far there is no reason to be disappointed with the result. Dwijendralal Babu<sup>2</sup> is coming on Monday next with his wife to inspect our farm.”

2. From a letter, dated 26th Agrahayan, 1312 B.S., written to the late Ramendrasundar Tribedi. (Published in *Bangabani*, Falgun 1333 B.S.).

1. The well-known historian, author of “Sirajuddola”, “Nababi Amal”, etc., who was a specialist in sericulture.

2. Late Mr. D. L. Roy, who was then an Agricultural Officer.



“ . . . . You may take it for certain that those who lose sight of the higher ideals and regard a boastfully self-assertive attitude towards the Government as the best means of cultivating our own strength and mistake it for the foundation of our own power, those who look upon the establishment of a national educational institution as nothing but a manifestation of that attitude, will never be able to render any abiding service to the country. If at the present moment such people are actually in a majority in the country and their influence in the ascendant, then it should be the duty of people like ourselves to devote our attention quietly to our own work. It would be wrong on our part to waste our time and energy in vain efforts and futile agitation. Besides, participation in the general excitement distracts the mind, at least partially, from the goal and is invariably followed by despondency. I have therefore resolved not to get excited over the preparation for a conflagration and, shall wait as long as I live, patiently on the road-side with my own light burning. . . . ”

3. From a letter written to Lady Abala Bose. Though not dated, it was presumably written from Silaidah in 1908. (Published in *Prabashi*, Sravana, 1345 B.S.).

“ . . . . At present I am preoccupied with the problems of our village society. I have made up my mind to provide an example of rural reconstruction work in our own Zemindari. A few boys from East Bengal have volunteered for the purpose. They live in villages in the midst of the people and are trying to organise the villagers so that they may themselves make provision for their own education and sanitation, for the settlement of dispute, etc. The workers have initiated such public works as the repair of roads and paths, excavation of tanks, cutting drains and clearing jungles. A deep despair now pervades rural life all over



the country, so much so that high-sounding phrases like home rule, autonomy etc. appear to me almost ridiculous and I feel ashamed even to utter them. Strangely enough, those who are most vociferous in the use of such words, are the least active in this particular field. Surendra Babu<sup>1</sup> and his followers have at last turned to the work of rural uplift. They have already made a beginning in Ward No. 9 of Calcutta and have also given us hope that they would extend their activities to villages. But our extremists are thinking all the time in extreme terms and are utterly indifferent as regards the immediate duties. So far they have not done a single work, however humble it may be. And yet they denounce the Moderates as idlers and empty orators. They are always quarrelling about words. That is why in spite of my growing infirmity I had to get into the field of active work. Invitations to attend public meetings will no longer move me. For whatever strength is left in me must be applied to what is the most urgent of all tasks before the country. I do hope that by the time you come back, the work of reconstruction will have made appreciable headway at Silaidaha and the neighbouring villages. . . . .”

4. From a letter written from Patisar to Mr. Rathindra Nath Tagore. There is no mention of date, but it appears to have been written some time in 1911-12. (Included in *Chithi-Patra*, Vol. II).

“A rice mill has been working at Bolpur. A similar mill would be very useful here. This is pre-eminently a paddy-growing tract and it grows more paddy than the Bolpur area.

“I think a solid beginning in co-operative work will have been made, if the cultivators were to run a mill collec-

1. Surendranath Banerjee.



tively with ownership distributed among themselves in the form of five-rupee or ten-rupee shares. With advances from our bank this business of rice-milling could easily be established here. Both Nagendra<sup>1</sup> and Janaki<sup>2</sup> think that this enterprise would suit this region and benefit the tenants.

Do be on the look out for such a mill.

I was also thinking as to what industries would be best suitable for the cultivators of this locality. Nothing grows here except paddy. The only other thing they possess is hard clay. I want to know if pottery can be carried on as a cottage industry. Will you therefore enquire if with a small furnace the people of a village can collectively run such an industry? It would be useful if they could manufacture rough plates and cups like those (of *sanki*) used by Mohammedans in general.

There is yet another possibility, namely, umbrella-making. If we could get hold of a suitable person to give the necessary training, it would be possible to introduce this craft into the Silaidaha region.

Nagendra was telling me that it would be of great advantage if we could bring over here a potter who could make tiles. People are keen on tin-roofs, but cannot afford them. Tiles would be a welcome substitute.

In any case, do enquire about the rice-mill, the wheel for pottery and an expert for umbrella-making. Please do not forget.

I am going to inspect the Ratwal region to-morrow. From there I shall visit Kamta and then shall start, perhaps on Thursday next, for Silaidah."

1. A son-in-law of the poet.

2. An officer of the estate.



5. From another letter written in 1910 to Mr. Rathindra Nath Tagore. (Included in *Chithi-Patra*, Vol. II).

“ . . . . . I joined many imposing enterprises. We founded the Swadeshi Stores which involved us in heavy losses. I blowed the trumpet of the National Educational Society and now I am ashamed of it. I was one of the principal organisers of the National Fund and now I feel conscience-stricken about it. Whenever something big was planned from the outset, the country became excited with hope, but then followed, almost inevitably, the phase of disillusionment and disgrace. Now I fully realise how utterly futile are such endeavours. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that, if any enterprise is to succeed in this country, then the best thing is to start it single-handed on a very modest scale and gradually build it up beyond the notice of the public. That is the natural method, particularly for those who must work in a miserly fashion because their means are small and their ability to bear initial losses limited. . . . . ”

6. From a letter written to Bhupes Roy,<sup>1</sup> dated, Patisar, Sravana 17th, 1315 B.S. (Published in *Purbasha*, Tagore Memorial Number).

“ . . . . . Encourage the villagers to plant fruit trees such as ananas, bananas and dates, in their homes, on the baulks of their fields and other places. The ananas leaves can be used for producing very strong yarn ; the fruit, too, can be sold. . . . If you can introduce potato cultivation, it will be a particularly profitable crop. Of course, it will need irrigation. But if each cultivator grows this crop on a *katha*<sup>2</sup> or so in his own garden, the difficulties of irrigation

1. One of the workers at Patisar.

2. A *katha* is one-twentieth of a *bigha* which is roughly a third of an acre.



need not be so very great. You will have to sow again the seeds of American maize, which you will find at our headquarters. Perhaps if you sow them by the middle of *Bhadra*, you would get the crop in the winter. Do follow the methods of scientific agriculture. Ask Ananga about the scientific side of the matter. The relevant materials are with him. . . . .”

7. From a letter written to Mr. Atul Sen.<sup>1</sup> No date or address has been mentioned, though it was most probably written some time in 1915. (Published in *Sanibarar Chithi*, *Asvin* 1348 B.S.).

“It gave me great pleasure to hear of the progress you have been making in your work. Your efforts will be crowned with success, if as a result every individual acquires the habit of exerting himself for collective welfare. It is my firm conviction that, once a real beginning is made in one place, the results will in no time spread far and wide.

“I have something else to urge upon you. A note of joy has to be sounded in all your work. Village life has become very dull. This dryness of the heart has to be banished. All welfare work ought to be turned as far as possible into an occasion of festive joy. There should be a tree-planting ceremony every year. I think you will do well to give the students a day off some time at the end of the month of *Vaishakh* and organise a picnic in a forest coupled with a tree-planting ceremony. If a festive element is introduced on the day on which some new work, such as the construction of a road, is launched, a religious appearance will be imparted to all your social activities.

“Another thing should be borne in mind. It will do a lot of good to the villager if he can be induced to take to

1. One of the workers at Kaligram during 1915-16.



the hobby of cultivating flowers. A few *bel* or a few rose plants, if grown in the yard of every cottage, will make the villages look beautiful. Let us not forget that this cultivation of beauty has become a very great necessity in our country.

“As regards the straw mat which was sent to me as a sample, I think it ought to be more densely woven with a larger quantity of straw. Otherwise with use it will give way here and there.

“The Manager had given me to understand that he would send me some *kantha* and *alpona*. Will you tell him that with the lapse of time, my hope has no doubt become feebler, but as yet it has not altogether vanished. If you come across any basket or pottery work, produced in the locality, please send them on to me. The Manager promised me the design of a model hut. He may have forgotten it, but I have not.”



## APPENDIX II

### A SHORT HISTORY OF THE GENERAL WELFARE SOCIETY OF KALIGRAM

The tenants of the estate used to make an extra contribution at the rate of 3 pies for every rupee<sup>1</sup> of the revenue paid. The funds thus realised used to be spent on a fair and a religious festival. In 1312 B.S. at a meeting held in memory of the late Debendranath Tagore, the father of the poet, it was decided to establish an entrance school and a charitable dispensary as Tagore memorials and for that purpose to raise a further contribution of 6 pies in addition to the original 3 pies per rupee. This was the beginning of the Welfare Fund at Kaligram.<sup>2</sup> Instead of an entrance school a minor one was established for the time being. A few years later it was decided to do away with the original subscription of 3 pies earmarked for the fair and the festival and to increase the total "welfare levy" to 15 pies per rupee. Some 25 *pathsalas* distributed over the pargana, a High English School and a charitable dispensary at Patisar were now financed from the Fund in addition to some public works every year.

In 1913, during a visit to the estate, Tagore advised that instead of spending most of the fund on the Patisar high

1. Called *Kalibritti*.

2. This name stood both for the fund and the body which organised it. To remove this anomaly the latter was renamed in 1319 B.S. and called the General Welfare Society. The organisation consisted of three branches at Patisar, Ratwal and Kamta respectively.



school, it would be better to have a middle school and a charitable dispensary at each of the three branches, and a *pathsala* in each village, while public works should be continued as before. This reorganisation was carried out in 1320 B.S., and no further changes took place until 1343 B.S.

In 1323 B.S. the late Mr. Surendranath Tagore arranged that a sum of Rs. 1850/- should be annually contributed from the Estate to the Welfare Fund. Since then the grant has continued. At the same time provision was made for special scholarships to facilitate the higher education of the tenants. Scholarships and other facilities are granted even now to deserving students.

In 1344 B.S. the Patisar school was again turned into a High English School while the other institutions continued to function as before.

Apart from the *pathsalas*, schools and charitable dispensaries mentioned above, the Society has to its credit substantial achievements in rural development work. Mention may be made in particular of the dam at Talimpur, the embankments at Kamta and Paroil, Debanagar-Saria road and the Maskipur tank. Besides, wells were sunk in many places.

Difficulties, however, arose in 1345 B.S. The "kishan" movement and other political forces which were gathering momentum in the country from year to year, did not leave this region untouched. The ryots of the Kamta division started agitation against the welfare levy. Accordingly, in *Paus* 1346 B.S. this branch was closed down and all connections were cut off with the institutions which had been started there.

It is now legally prohibited to take extras from ryots over and above the amount of revenue. It is, however, significant that officials, after examining the papers of the



Society, did not object to the contribution to the Welfare Fund. Some of them even helped to ensure its continuation.

The income from the levy (at present 15 pies per rupee) normally amounts to something like Rs. 5,500, to which is added the annual contribution of Rs. 1,850 from the Estate. This sum is spent under three heads: health, education and public works. The income of the Kamta section which is included in the above figures, would amount to Rs. 2,000 including its share in the grant from the Estate.

The agricultural bank which for a long time rendered very useful service to the cultivating classes, is now winding up its business. It has been suffering from the same general factors which in recent years have completely dislocated rural credit in the country. Similarly, the practice of settling disputes by arbitration, which was in vogue for a long time and which greatly benefited the people, had to be suspended after the Debt Settlement Act came into force, as this Act made arbitration by private bodies difficult, if not impossible.



### APPENDIX III

EXTRACT FROM "BENGAL DISTRICT GAZETTEERS—RAJSHAHI"  
BY MR. L. S. S. O'MALLEY (1916)

It must not be imagined that a powerful landlord is always oppressive and uncharitable. A striking instance to the contrary is given in the Settlement Officer's account of the estate of Rabindra Nath Tagore, the Bengali poet, whose fame is world-wide. It is clear that to poetical genius he adds practical and beneficial ideas of estate management, which should be an example to the local Zemindars.

"A very favourable example of estate government is shown in the property of the poet, Sir Rabindra Nath Tagore. The proprietors brook no rivals. Sub-infeudation within the estate is forbidden ; raiyats are not allowed to sublet on pain of ejectment. There are three divisions of the estate, each under a sub-Manager with a staff of tahsildars, whose accounts are strictly supervised. Half of the dakhilas are checked by an officer of the head office. Employees are expected to deal fairly with the raiyats, and unpopularity earns dismissal. Registration of transfer is granted on a fixed fee, but is refused in the case of an undesirable transferee. Remissions of rent are granted, when inability to pay is proved. In 1312 it is said that the amount remitted was Rs. 57,595. There are lower primary schools in each division ; and at Patisar, the centre of management, there is a High English School with 250 students and a charitable dispensary. These are maintained out of a fund to which the estate contributes annually Rs. 1,250, and the raiyats 6 pies per rupee in their rent.



### APPENDIX III

There is an annual grant of Rs. 240 for the relief of cripples and the blind. An agricultural bank advances loans to raiyats at 12 per cent per annum. The depositors are chiefly Calcutta friends of the poet, who get interest at 7 per cent. The bank has about Rs. 90,000 invested in loans."



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